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“THE FULLEST POSSIBLE ACCOUNT”:
KNOWLEDGE AND EXCEPTIONALISM IN POST-9/11 LITERATURE

A Dissertation

Submitted to McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Lee Ann Glowzenski

August 2014

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Lee Ann Glowzenski

2014

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KNOWLEDGE AND EXCEPTIONALISM IN POST-9/11 LITERATURE

By

Lee Ann Glowzenski

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ABSTRACT

“THE FULLEST POSSIBLE ACCOUNT”:
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August 2014

Dissertation supervised by Magali Michael

This dissertation examines the intertwined histories of science and American exceptionalism, contending that the September 11th attacks undermine the nation’s sense of its scientific superiority and result in the creation of a body of 21st-century literature that explores the country’s position as a technological superpower. Specifically, because September 11th counters the nation’s belief in its capacity to prevent or contain such attacks, the literature grapples with related challenges to concepts of knowledge, self, and nation.

Chapter One traces the post-World War II relationships among science, military-industrial research, and American culture, arguing that the image of a national security

bolstered by scientific research and development dominates narratives of defense from the post-World War II years through September 11th. Chapter Two considers *The 9/11 Report* and its graphic adaptation as natural outgrowths of the histories of technology and American exceptionalism. While *The 9/11 Report* insists that it cannot create for the reader an experience of total knowledge (i.e. that the report cannot “know all and see all”), the graphic adaptation asserts that the event can be completely known, understood, and integrated into existing narratives of dominance and superiority. Chapter Three reads *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as a detective story. While Foer incorporates many of the tropes of the pre-World War II detective into the writing of his protagonist, Oskar, he balances this traditional characterization with a complex understanding of knowledge work by modeling for the reader the process of ethical witnessing. Chapter Four traces Colson Whitehead’s tortured relationship with the city he both loves and fears in *The Colossus of New York*. *Colossus* specifically addresses challenges to the technological arm of exceptionalist discourse by exploring how the nation never has the final say in how its technologies are employed. In reading technological change as akin to geologic change, Whitehead naturalizes the eventual dissolution of the city but at the same time imagines contemporary fusions of human and machine as equally inescapable and redemptive.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I want to first thank my son, Elliott, who has shown more patience and exuberance for my work than anyone could have expected from a now-5-year-old. Often, onlookers assume that having a child derails the dissertation process, but the truth is that I only earned my degree because of, and for, him.

I would not have finished this project without the help of my family. My mom has been like a second mother to my son, especially during this past year's rush to the finish, and my dad has driven the length of Pennsylvania more times than anyone can count. Their unconditional support has taught me what it means to be a compassionate parent. My brother, Joseph, has always been my first and best reader. So much of the deeper work of this dissertation has been figured out in conversation with him, and I am grateful for his time and energy. And my husband Uri has offered exactly the right words of encouragement while putting my work ahead of his own this year.

Wonderful friends have seen me through this process. I'm especially thankful for the support of Meghan Cadwallader, Amanda Santmyer, Megan Hernandez, Kate Kwiatkowski, and Clara Cristofaro. I also made the virtual acquaintance of a group of women who were likewise raising young children while finishing their dissertations. I am incredibly grateful to Dr. Jana Tigchelaar, Dr. Liana Silva-Ford, and the soon-to-be-Dr. Dacia Mitchell for the unlimited emotional support and for the blocks of writing measured out in naps and lunch breaks. And in my non-virtual life, I am thankful for the academic-mom friendship of Courtney Novosat, whose kindness and brilliance have been a gift not just to me but to my son as well.

I was privileged to be a member of a number of writing groups at Duquesne over the years. Many thanks to Betina Jones, Beth Buhot Runquist, Michelle Gaffey, and Jennifer Collins Gorman for their reading and insightful comments. The Writing Center at Duquesne became a second home in the years following my graduate assistantship, and I am especially grateful for Jim Purdy's support. Likewise, Mickey Harris and the *Writing Lab Newsletter* staff have warmly welcomed me into a community of which I am proud to be a member.

Finally, I am grateful for the talent and generosity of my committee. Magali Michael's unwavering support helped convince me that mine was a project worth finishing, and her careful review of countless drafts has helped me to become a better, "sharper" writer. And from the beginning of my coursework ten years ago to our final dissertation committee meeting, Judy Suh and Laura Callanan have challenged my thinking and acted as outstanding models of politically committed scholarship.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgement.....	vi
Introduction: “A hole in the familiar”: September 11 th and Knowledge Production.....	ix
Chapter One: Perceptions of Science in American Culture.....	1
From Frontier Science to Big Science (1945-1970).....	8
Challenges to Science (1970-2001).....	16
Post-9/11 Critiques of Postmodernism.....	22
September 11 th and Scientific Practice.....	28
Exceptional Surveillance.....	34
Science and 9/11 Literature.....	40
Chapter Two: Truths, Self Evident: Inventing Authenticity and Generating Knowledge in <i>The 9/11 Report</i> (2004, 2006).....	56
Critical Reception of <i>The 9/11 Report</i> (text, 2004).....	61
The Novel as History.....	67
<i>The 9/11 Report as Contemporary Thriller</i>	74
“As neutral as possible”: Exceptionalist Discourse in <i>The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation</i> (2006).....	82
“At a glance . . . all the facts”: The Exceptional Knowability of 9/11.....	107
Chapter Three: “Everyone could be safe”: Global Citizenship and the Moral Imagination in Jonathan Safran Foer’s <i>Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close</i> (2005).....	112
Part One: The Science of Detection.....	118
Features of the Detective Story.....	118
Contemporary Detective Stories and the Trauma Narrative.....	122
<i>Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close</i> as Exceptionalist Detective Story...	127
Part Two: The Imagination Against Disaster.....	139
Part Three: Engaging the Ethical Reader.....	151
Chapter Four: “Whatever it was, it wasn’t human!”: Manufacturing Identity in <i>The Colossus of New York</i> (2003).....	166
Frankenstein Stories.....	170
Mad Robots and Killer Scientists: <i>The Colossus of New York</i> (1958).....	180
<i>The Colossus of New York</i> meets <i>Der Golem</i> (1920).....	189
“Keep this machine up and running”: <i>The Colossus of New York</i> (2003).....	205
Works Cited.....	236

Introduction

“A hole in the familiar”: September 11th and Knowledge Production¹

This project considers September 11th as a knowledge problem, as an event that at once disrupts the United States’ perception of itself as an exceptional nation and momentarily interrupts the long ascendancy to technological supremacy on which that exceptionalist perception rests. The questions motivating this study stem from the question, “how did the attacks happen?” I contend that the event’s significance in American culture stems not merely from lives lost or buildings destroyed but also from a series of conceptual shifts, a change from “it can’t happen here” to “it can happen any time, anywhere,” from the belief that the nation is an object of envy and admiration to the realization that the nation is subject to criticism and attack. While many Americans already understood both that the United States can be the target of non-state violence and that “safety” is a privilege enjoyed by a (class and racial) minority rather than a right belonging to the majority, September 11th was deemed at the time, and has remained in public discourse, the “day everything changed.”² As Wendell Berry notes in his essay “Thoughts in the Presence of Fear,” “We did not anticipate anything like what has now happened. We did not foresee that all our sequence of innovations might be at once

¹ In the essay “Groundzeroland,” Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe write of the attacks’ aftermath, “In the perceptual world something new would collapse into view. And tomorrow’s newness—awful, to be sure, in more than one sense—would be signified by an absence of two heretofore boring buildings; a hole in the familiar. Those New Yorkers without connection to the dead, the injured, and the displaced would grieve (and fear) not for the dead, the injured, and the displaced, but for themselves, undergoing now the terror of the new” (350). I consider the notion of the “terror of the new” later in this introduction.

² Resistance to the representation of 9/11 as a singular event stems mainly from objections to right-wing manipulations of that representation. That is, because “never before and never again” thinking was used to galvanize the war efforts in 2002 and 2003, for example, attention ought to be drawn to the “before,” which includes the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, the bombings of the U.S.S. Cole and two U.S. embassies in East Africa in 1998, and the intended millennial attacks on Los Angeles Airport. Furthermore, objection arises to the idea that the United States ought not be subject to the same atrocities--namely, attacks on unarmed civilian populations--that it perpetuates or supports abroad.

overridden by a greater one: the invention of a new kind of war that would turn our previous innovations against us, discovering and exploiting the debits and the dangers that we had ignored” (280).³ Berry locates the event’s singularity in the fact that the nation’s own knowledge was turned against it; specifically, technological achievements long considered the basis of the nation’s defensive and offensive superiority became instead the source of its vulnerability. When Americans ask “how did it happen?”, they are in part asking how technologies designed to serve and protect the homeland could neither predict nor prevent the attack.

September 11th undermines the sense of national invincibility rooted in the supposed scientific and moral superiority related to technological progress. As Berry notes, “We had accepted uncritically the belief that technology is only good; that it cannot serve evil as well as good; that it cannot serve our enemies as well as ourselves; that it cannot be used to destroy what is good, including our homelands and our lives” (280).⁴ The national myth of indomitability rests on the unproven notion that technology cannot be used against its own source and, further, that progress alone constitutes the nation’s primary goal. Likewise, lack of progress—either falling behind in or failing to join the knowledge race—becomes evidence of the unworthiness of a people or a nation.

As Berry explains, “All things superseded in our progress of innovations, whatever their

³ There are variations on the way that different writers describe the uniqueness of the event. For example, Anthony Lane explains the visual impact, writing, “Europe was raised on rubble; each I.R.A. bomb in London or Birmingham was a revived insult to the moral sense, but its visual aftermath—knots and scraps where a building used to be—was nothing new. Here, as emergency services groped through the black-and-white fallout of the vanished towers, and as color drained from the scene, the horror was new” (“This Is Not A Movie”).

⁴ Admittedly, the myth of technology as pure force of good is undone by the Holocaust: the annihilation of so many millions of people required not just sophisticated military technologies but also the perfection of more mundane systems of technology and knowledge (e.g. trains that run on time, record-keeping systems that log each boxcar of human cargo, and so forth).

value might have been, were discounted as of no value at all” (280). Planned obsolescence—the idea that each new technological upgrade renders its predecessor unfashionable if not useless—helps to make non-Western cultures seem unworthy of attention. That is, because the general population of non-First World nations appears unable to keep pace with the acquisition of more and better technology (in terms of consumer devices, but also in terms of military science), the West assumes that they have no technological presence to speak of, and certainly no reputable or fearsome military industry. In the battle of knowledge, the United States seems to possess all of the advantages, yet it has lacked the crucial awareness of unimagined possibilities. The nation’s understanding of its place in the world is great but terribly incomplete.

When I employ the term “knowledge,” I am most often referring to the post-World War II knowledge work performed in American universities that is funded in part by the United States government and eventually comes to drive the engine of American technological supremacy and worldwide military expansion and dominance. This literal knowledge work—the science that leads to the creation of technologies that make military expansionism possible—supports the nation’s self-perception of superiority. I thus treat American exceptionalism as the logical conclusion of military science, a way of thinking about the nation’s place in the world that is impossible without the existence of scientific and technological superiority. The September 11th attacks directly dispute this knowledge, informing the nation first that its own technology can be used against it in an attack that sophisticated military and civilian defense systems can fail to prevent and, second, that the nation’s assumptions regarding its own strengths prove untrue. Exceptionalist discourse fails on September 11th not only because technologies failed but

also because the attacks demonstrated that the nation (in its role as “beacon on the hill”) does not occupy the center of the world’s admiration, imitation, and desire.

This radical disruption of the nation’s sense of self results, not surprisingly, in knowledge-production overdrive: despite finding itself in an asymmetric war, the government chooses to pursue the technologies of symmetry, returning to traditional funding models and research projects designed to enhance large-scale military development (including the waging of two modern-traditional wars in Afghanistan and Iraq). Simultaneously, the government complements land grabs in the Middle East with knowledge grabs both at home and abroad, resulting in the construction of some of the largest-scale surveillance systems in the history of surveillance. Likewise, the nation attempts to demonstrate control over knowledge of the event through the creation of the 9/11 Commission. The resulting *9/11 Report* gathers an enormous amount of data about the attacks and shapes it into an account that provides “the fullest possible account of the events” and as such will enable the creation of “an America that is safer, stronger, and wiser” (Preface to *The 9/11 Report* xvi). I thus read the nation’s response to September 11th as a doubling-down in the game of knowledge: to compensate for lacks in technology and surveillance as well as the inability of the exceptionalist narrative to inspire admiration (if not fear) in the rest of the world, the United States experiences the post-9/11 era as one of hyper-production of military/surveillance technologies and exceptionalist rhetoric.

Three related notions inform my own argument about September 11th. First, there is Donald Rumsfeld’s “unknown unknowns” speech, a speech that, regardless of one’s evaluation of Rumsfeld’s moral character, brilliantly summarizes the 9/11 knowledge

problem. In a February 2002 Defense Department press briefing, Rumsfeld states, “There are known knowns; there are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns; that is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns – there are things we do not know we don't know” (“DoD News Briefing”). Rumsfeld argues that, while the government has no knowledge of a link between Iraq and weapons of mass destruction, the mere lack of knowledge does not mean that the link does not exist. While Rumsfeld would likely classify Iraq’s WMD status as a “known unknown”—his administration knows that Iraq poses some kind of threat, but the exact nature of the threat is unknown—September 11th struck the American public⁵ as an unknown unknown, an event unimaginable and thus unpredictable. The public’s fear of the unknown unknown undergirds government arguments for post-9/11 military and surveillance systems growth: the administration must know more (increase foreign and domestic surveillance) and prepare more (increase defense funding and conflict engagement) to prevent future terrorist actions.

The growth of surveillance systems coupled with decades-spanning military engagements in the Middle East invites a consideration of the United States as empire, and, while this project does not extensively rely on postcolonial theory in textual readings, it does exhibit a specifically postcolonial ethos. In his 2003 preface to *Orientalism*, written during the escalation of the second Iraq War, Edward Said writes, “Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort” (xvi). Said makes this statement

⁵ I specify “American public” here because, for the U.S. government, September 11th was in fact a known unknown. The administration was aware that Al Qaeda was planning an attack but could not determine ahead of time the means or scale of the attack.

knowing that the United States has embarked on a civilizing mission to bring democracy to the people of Iraq and to free the nation from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein. For Rumsfeld and the Bush administration, this is a known known, but for those who would oppose the conflict, the administration's paternalism (i.e. what it purports to know about the best interest of both Iraq and the United States) represents a turn toward imperial logic at home and abroad. Nicholas B. Dirks claims that "Colonial knowledge both enabled conquest and was produced by it; in certain important ways, knowledge was what colonialism was all about" (ix). In certain important ways, knowledge is what September 11th is all about. The attacks begin as a lack of knowledge, as an event the nation should have predicted and therefore could have prevented. Post-9/11 military conflicts stand as compensation for that lack and play out on the landscapes of the Middle East. What the nation did not know about Al Qaeda before September 11th is thus replaced by what it claims to have always known: that the enemies in Iraq and Afghanistan must be conquered and the people saved. Military engagements thus serve to bolster not just the image of the nation as a traditional superpower but also the sense that the government knows exactly who and where its enemies are and how it can vanquish them. In its consideration of September 11th as knowledge problem, this project thus implicitly considers the "unknown known" of the United States as empire.

The reception of science in contemporary culture likewise strongly influences the shape of this project. Particularly, I have found it helpful to compare the United States after 9/11 to the British Empire after the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. According to Philip Appleman, "It is not easy . . . to enter fully into the mind-set of the early Victorians, in which both religion and science presupposed the

glory of God to be manifested in nature. Nor is it easy . . . to imagine the intellectual and emotional upheaval that Darwin's work would cause. . . . The effects of that publication were immediate, extensive, and profound" ("Darwin: On Changing the Mind" 4, 7). The "Darwinian moment" represents the moment when one's ideologically-invested perception of the universe radically shifts to realign with scientific reality. For Americans, 9/11 engendered a similar shift, from the notion of the United States as a "city upon a hill" to the realization that the nation is as vulnerable to an attack as any other in an asymmetric conflict where technological superiority becomes meaningless. I choose this comparison of 9/11 to Darwin because it follows the contours of the downward shift from the notion of one's self or nation as appointed and protected by God (center of the universe, central to all existence) to the realization that self and nation deserve no special purpose or protection. For Americans, a longstanding perception of invincibility was radically realigned to fit the reality of successful asymmetrical attacks. The event thus enables a "scientific discovery" of the ways in which science can fail, providing a new data set that disproves the longstanding theory of the nation's technological superiority. To be clear, I am not attempting to make a one-to-one comparison between the publication of *Origin* and the 9/11 attacks.⁶ Rather, I bring Darwin into this conversation in order to suggest that some writers choose to engage

⁶ Žižek especially helps temper the strength of the metaphor I use here. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* he writes, "Cruel and indifferent as it may sound, we should also, now more than ever, bear in mind that the actual effect of these bombings is much more symbolic than real. The United States just got a taste of what goes on around the world on a daily basis, from Sarajevo to Grozny, from Rwanda and Congo to Sierra Leone. If one adds to the situation in New York snipers and gang rapes, one gets an idea about what Sarajevo was a decade ago" (388). Darwin's text introduced a new explanation for the development of life. The theory itself was under consideration for a few decades, but the publication was a watershed moment, a shift in thinking about the place of humans in scientific discourse about the world. September 11th, by comparison, *felt* like the same kind of watershed event to most Americans but, as Žižek points out, the experience of violence and insecurity (decontextualized, without its media frame) was familiar to a good part of the world.

questions of knowledge production in the context of September 11th precisely because the event alters the nation's understanding of its place in the world.⁷

The four chapters of this project examine the concomitant histories of science and American exceptionalism, the function of exceptionalist discourse in the creation of *The 9/11 Report*, and the challenges to that discourse evident in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The Colossus of New York*. In Chapter One, I trace the post-World War II development of the relationship among science, military-industrial research, and American culture. The concept of a national security bolstered by scientific research and development dominates narratives of defense from the post-World War II years through September 11th, at which point the nation's technological supremacy is challenged. Immediately following 9/11, the scientific community works to reassert its power, aided by increased federal funding for large-scale defense projects. Chapter One thus provides the necessary context for a study that examines how texts that address the events of September 11th participate in or reject the project of bolstering pre-9/11 ideals of technological superiority.

In Chapter Two, I consider both the textual and graphic adaptations of *The 9/11 Report* as a natural outgrowth of the histories of American technology and exceptionalism I trace in Chapter One. As a feat of knowledge production, *The 9/11 Report* attempts to account for the mistakes and missteps in defense and surveillance that led to the attacks, yet the report provocatively insists that it cannot create for the reader

⁷ Alternately, this might be called the “why do we care so much?” question. Critics and reviewers often ponder the sheer bulk of literature produced about 9/11 in the years following the attacks, especially given that only a fraction of the nation was directly harmed in the attacks. The so-called “fly-over states” seemingly had no true stake in the event because, as commentators were fond of mentioning, small-town-USA was not likely to be come under attack (see, for example, Michael Moore’s humorous consideration of the threat against Tappahannock, Virginia in *Fahrenheit 9/11*). This project contends that the attacks’ status as a knowledge-shifting event accounts for its prominence in 21st-century literature.

an experience of total knowledge, of answers for all of the “how did it happen?” questions. Meanwhile, the graphic adaptation, created by comic book veterans Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón, retains the original report’s wording but silences *The 9/11 Report*’s attempts to acknowledge the nation’s shortcomings. Instead, the adaptation constructs a version of a superior national defense over and against images of primitive technologies employed by al Qaeda. As Malini Johar Schueller notes, in the aftermath of 9/11 “Categories of colonial racial difference, never totally absent even during the Cold War, were given renewed legitimacy by the state,” resulting in “the representation of Arabs either as creatures of unchanging timeless societies or as irrationally crazed ones” (56). As interpreters and adapters of *The 9/11 Report*, Jacobson and Colón read the report from an exceptionalist standpoint that ultimately colors the text they create. The graphic adaptation engages racial stereotypes in order to isolate and contain the real critique of exceptionalist discourse identifiable in the attacks. At the same time, the graphic adaptation takes the 9/11 Commission’s findings, including admitted gaps in knowledge and failures of existing military technology and surveillance systems, and rewrites them into a long, momentarily interrupted but never reversed, history of dominance and superiority. Most significantly, the graphic report does what the original report refuses to do: it offers a sense of totalizing knowledge, of an event that can be completely known, understood, and integrated into existing narratives of the nation.

While many of the cultural and political texts in this study attempt work to reinforce exceptionalist discourse, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The Colossus of New York* choose to question, complicate, and even revise that discourse. Chapter Three reads *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as a detective story. A

detective story is, after all, a work of knowledge production. Oskar wants to find the “true story” of his father’s death, a narrative that would return to him the last minutes of his father’s death in the collapse of the Towers. Following the scientific method, Oskar manages to piece together a story of his father’s death, a seemingly impossible achievement that can be read as symptomatic of an exceptionalist desire to make meaning of the senselessness of the 9/11 attacks. Yet, while Foer incorporates many of the tropes of the pre-World War II detective—intelligence, urban experience, community—into the writing of Oskar, he balances this traditional characterization with a complex understanding of knowledge work and a relativistic construction of the United States in relation to those nations against which it has perpetrated violence. The transhistorical nature of the novel calls into question acts of war waged by the United States by drawing parallels between the bombings of Hiroshima and Dresden and the 9/11 attacks. Beyond simply calling into question narratives of “the good war,” *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* undermines post-9/11 narratives regarding the innocence of the United States and its absolute right to defend itself against attack.

For Oskar, knowledge of the nation’s role in perpetrating similar acts of war results in the quest to form a redemptive form of scientific practice. Similarly, the narrators of Colson Whitehead’s *The Colossus of New York* are troubled by the unchecked technological progress of the city, progress on which they depend but which they cannot fully trust or endorse. Chapter Four traces Whitehead’s tortured relationship with the city he both loves and fears. Whitehead first creates an image of New York as factory that consumes individuals and manufactures them into seemingly identical “New Yorkers.” However, he gradually moves toward an alternative New York by reading

September 11th as a natural, value-neutral experience that derives from technological progress. *Colossus* thus specifically addresses challenges to the technological arm of exceptionalist discourse by exploring how the nation never has the final say in how its technologies are employed.

In the process of examining questions of technology, exceptionalism, and knowledge production in my reading of *The 9/11 Report*, its graphic adaptation, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and *The Colossus of New York*, several theoretical threads emerge to bind together these varied texts.⁸ First, an identifiable progression emerges from the reports through *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Colossus*: the reports attempt to totalize knowledge of the event; Oskar desires the quantity and quality of knowledge the reports contain but recognizes the dangers of such knowledge; and, finally, in creating a city that “knows” and “remembers, too,” Whitehead envisions a monstrous city that stops short of surveilling its inhabitants but nevertheless knows all and sees all. While the reports locate in surveillance an opportunity to prevent future attacks, Whitehead envisions such a state as a monster. Meanwhile, Foer’s vision of a multi-voiced, communal scientific practice stands against colonial modes of knowledge (like those in the report) that create a hierarchy of knowing subjects and known objects. Jacobson and Colon’s adaptation is populated with such objects, the Orientalized men seemingly trapped in pre-modern Afghanistan, while Whitehead’s text touches on notions of technological devolution and New York’s eventual return to a primal state. Connecting all of these texts, then, is the urge to *know*: to construct the attacks as knowable and

⁸ While I do not explore them in this project, immigrant stories also tie all of the texts together. Oskar’s grandfather cannot fulfill the immigrant’s dream of starting life anew in America (Versluys). Likewise, Whitehead’s New Yorkers come to the city but fail to find rebirth and renewal there. And finally, the reports lament that the hijackers did not fulfill the role of the grateful immigrant, instead coming to the United States and using its technologies not to “better themselves,” but to attack their adopted land.

containable, to problematize such knowledge, to imagine the logical conclusion of a world (or at least a city) in which such knowledge exists, and to question what happens when the “aftermath” of the attacks becomes, simply, the “after.”

Chapter One

Perceptions of Science in American Culture

This chapter examines how the United States' presumed technological supremacy functions in the construction of the myth of national invulnerability after September 11th. In *The Terror Dream*, Susan Faludi explores what she calls the "hero story" of 9/11, a framework that treats "male rescuers and female captives" (57) as the descendants of a long history of attacks on the homeland, thereby providing a means by which to imagine an ultimately positive outcome to the September 11th attacks. Faludi argues that 9/11 is not an unimaginable event but rather an event that "awakened [anxieties] deep in our cultural memory," anxieties that had until recently been kept at bay by an elaborately constructed myth of invincibility (13). Faludi's main concern is the effect of 9/11 on constructions of gender but, by connecting the unexpected attack on the United States in 2001 to similarly unexpected (though not unimaginable) attacks on frontier settlements, *The Terror Dream* invites two discussions: a consideration of the function of myth-making following the event, and a reading of September 11th in the context of prior threats to national security, including the Cold War. My study looks to the public sphere, and the relationship between America's scientific supremacy and sense of invulnerability that grew together during the Cold War, to create a context for a number of distinct texts: *The 9/11 Report*, *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaption*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and *The Colossus of New York*. Here and in the chapters that follow, I argue that the nation's technological might, challenged by the September 11th attacks, constitutes a key component of the myth of exceptionalism with which these works engage.

Exceptionalism in American political discourse encompasses the notion that the United States is “qualitatively different from all other countries” (Lipset 18) based on its “unique origins, national credo, historical evolution, and distinctive political and religious institutions” (Koh 1481). “Different” in this context necessarily translates to “better,” for as Koh explains, “America’s canonical commitments to liberty, equality, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire somehow exempt it from the historical forces that have led to the corruption of other societies” (1481). The assumption here is that the United States excels because its political and cultural standpoints saves it from conflicts that have embroiled other nations. Stanley Hoffman locates this immunity to harm in the nation’s rejection of European expansionist colonialism and aristocracy combined with “its geographically privileged position: far enough away from Europe and Asia to be able to be safe and uninvolved yet capable of expanding into contiguous territories easily” (115). Exemption also means that the U.S. has historically considered itself safe from foreign attack. Prior to 9/11, “war” has mainly meant overseas military engagement in conjunction with coalition forces (since 1990, these conflicts include the Gulf War and UN-backed engagements in Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Rwanda) and domestic terrorism/homegrown militias (Waco, Oklahoma City). While the decade since the first Gulf War certainly did not pass without loss of military and civilian life, the United States was more often cast as the untouchable superpower. The 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, for example, resulted in minor structural damage and fewer than ten deaths and contributed to the perception of the nation as untouchable (and of the WTC complex in particular as indestructible).

Only the failure of the Vietnam War contests the notion of an infallible American global presence. In his study of American exceptionalism since the Vietnam era, William Spanos explains that “[t]he American national identity was radically destabilized, if not shattered, during the decade of the Vietnam War” (xv). Specifically, Vietnam called into question the myth of America’s benevolent pursuit of democracy on foreign soil: “The unspeakable violence perpetrated in the name of the principles of freedom . . . symptomatically disclosed at multiple sites on the continuum of being the contradictions inhering in the truth discourse of liberal capitalist democracy” (14). However, as Spanos notes, the “cultural forgetting” of Vietnam, combined with the fact that it occurred on foreign soil,⁹ resulted in the war having little effect on the overall image of an invulnerable nation.

September 11th arguably poses the first major challenge to the discourse of American exceptionalism, in so far as one considers foreign-based threats to “the homeland.” According to Koh, “September 11 brought upon the United States, like Achilles, a schizophrenic sense of its exceptional power, coupled with its exceptional vulnerability. Never has a superpower seemed so powerful and so vulnerable at the same time” (1498). The U.S. finds itself vulnerable not only because of the success of the attack but also because of the unknown future of “a universal war that knows no border, which makes the idea of victory perfectly unrealistic” (Hoffman 23). However, instead of inspiring a revision of exceptionalist discourse, the first successful asymmetrical attack on domestic territory in over fifty years has invited a narrow range of responses from policy makers, none of which question the validity of exceptionalism. According to

⁹ Vietnam was a media event, and the media made the war visible in the US in a way that it had not been visible before. Likewise, the protest movement acted as a subsidiary war front, with its populace visibly and vociferously opposed to military action. The draft debacle also generated a sense of constant threat.

Francis Fukuyama, the U.S. should “downplay its dominance” (190) but at the same time continue to pursue “global order and security” (102). Such a stance is in keeping with a neoconservative desire for “a policy of benevolent hegemony in which the United States would use its power to create a benign, peaceful, and democratic world order” (102). In other words, one of the conditions that contributed to the attack on the United States—“benevolent” hegemony—remains for some a legitimate response to the attack. Likewise Koh asks, “Do we have a strategy to encourage the right kinds of exceptionalism...? [O]ur goal should be to reduce double standards while expanding our capacity for global leadership” (1527). He also argues against “global pessimism” based on fears of globalization and in favor of a response to 9/11 similar to FDR’s response to Pearl Harbor, which focuses on the U.S. capacity to establish the Four Freedoms (freedoms of speech and religion and freedom from want and fear) worldwide (1498). Indeed, the Bush Doctrine, “founded on the assumption that America’s values are universally cherished except by nasty tyrants and evil terrorists” (Hoffman 124), pursues global military hegemony, “benevolent” in its stated goal of spreading democracy.

Donald Pease’s *The New American Exceptionalism* explains that myths are necessary after events like September 11th because such events undermine the nation’s sense of its identity. If the United States thinks of itself as an exceptional nation in terms of both military power and domestic safety, then 9/11, which negates those ideals, must be countered with a reassertion of America’s exceptional position. By placing 9/11 in the context of existing myths, it also becomes possible to imagine an end to a crisis that, in the moment, appears incomprehensible and thus unending. As Pease explains, “[H]istorical and political crises of the magnitude of 9/11 are always accompanied by

mythologies that attempt to reconfigure them within frames of reference that would generate imaginary resolutions to these crises” (Pease 156). By presenting a new event within an old context, the myth helps the public regain control of a traumatic event by providing the power to narrate both the event’s larger meaning in the country’s history, and its ending, which is almost always positive.

Exceptionalism is not the only myth in play after 9/11, however. According to Faludi, gender is another controlling agent in post-9/11 myth-making. Faludi examines how cultural reactions to 9/11 reflect the nation’s frontier beginnings. She writes,

We perceive our country as inviolable, shielded from enemy penetration. Indeed, in recent history the United States has been, among nations, one of the most immune to attack on its home soil. And yet, our foundational drama as a society was apposite [sic], a profound exposure to just such assaults, murderous homeland incursions by dark-skinned, non-Christian combatants under the flag of no recognized nation . . . who attacked white America on its “own” soil and against civilian targets. (208)¹⁰

The United States’ contemporary myth of invulnerability formed as a reaction to the earliest “violations” of the American homeland, thus demonstrating that 9/11 is unsettling not because it is unfamiliar but rather because it is too familiar (208). Because “homeland incursions” like September 11th are “the characteristic and formative American ordeal” (208), the only way to cope with them is to reassert a gender-based narrative of heroes and heroines that grew up in response to the original “terrorism.” This “national

¹⁰ While it is possible to imagine many variations on this myth, Faludi speaks specifically of the “origins story” of the frontier the pits the settlers (read contemporarily as conquerors, but in mythic terms as saviors on a civilizing mission) against Native Americans in a battle for both the literal land and the figurative territory of the female settler’s body. Native American women are written into and out of the myth simultaneously—they comprise part of the literal land but lack figurative or spiritual/political value.

fantasy,” as Faludi calls it, involves “the denigration of capable women, the magnification of manly men, the heightened call for domesticity, the search for and sanctification of helpless girls” (14). This is the original frontier myth, into which the characters of the 9/11 drama, including first responders and widows, are slotted. Faludi’s frontier story is a variation on the myth of exceptionalism, both of which allow the nation to imagine itself as inhabiting a story with a happy ending, where the forces of good overcome the forces of evil.¹¹

The myths that Faludi and Pease detail resurface not just after 9/11 but also during the Cold War as well; just as the frontier required protection, so did the nation in response to the threat of global nuclear annihilation. Faludi and others have noted that the ideal of suburban American life following World War II represents “the connection between nuclear insecurity and the securing of American domesticity” (282). Elaine Tyler May’s description of domestic ideology during the Cold War mirrors Faludi’s description of frontier-era domesticity. As May notes, “Within [the home], potentially dangerous social forces of the new age might be tamed, where they could contribute to the secure and fulfilling life to which postwar women and men aspired” (14). Taking the work of Faludi, Pease, and May together, a pattern emerges: the national myth of invincibility, which formed following America’s goal of the eradication of Native peoples during the 19th century, must be reasserted each and every time a threat to that myth is posed. This myth posits an exceptional nation whose status is supported by domestic ideology.

¹¹ Pease’s discussion of the Virgin Land myth supports Faludi’s argument: “When Bush declared the country ‘wounded,’ he interpreted the violation on mythological as well as historical registers. The wound was directed against the Virgin Land as well as U.S. people’s fantasy of itself as radically innocent” (159).

While texts like those of Pease, May, and Faludi explain the interdependence of the nation's assertions of invulnerability and the private sphere that supports it, they do not explore myths related to the public sphere, including the perception of American military dominance undergirded by scientific and technological superiority. The concept of a national security bolstered by scientific research and development dominates narratives of defense from the post- World War II years through September 11th, at which point the nation's technological supremacy is challenged. This chapter examines the means by which two ideals—invulnerability and technological superiority—grow and become intertwined after the Cold War. The destruction of the World Trade Center, a symbol of technological achievement (Morrione 158), fractures not just the nation's myth of invincibility but also its belief in the powers of scientific research and applied technology to provide protection from external threats. Immediately following 9/11, the scientific community works to reassert its power, aided by increased federal funding for large-scale defense and surveillance projects. Meanwhile, in the culture at large, critics undertake the work of restoring belief in the nation's invulnerability in part by raising objections to cultural relativism, considered by some to be the "enemy within" that invites attacks on the nation. This chapter traces attitudes toward science in American culture from the Cold War era through September 11th in order to provide a context for a study that examines how *The 9/11 Report*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and *The Colossus of New York* either bolster or reject pre-9/11 ideals of technological superiority.

From Frontier Science to Big Science (1945-1970)

The development of technological supremacy as a crucial aspect of American identity begins in the post-Civil War era. According to historian Valéry Cholakov, the period between 1870 and 1970 was “a time of ‘technological optimism’” (124), when science was considered “‘the endless frontier’ which would lead humanity to progress and prosperity” (123).¹² Cholakov notes a link between a notion of the American West as a physical territory of exploration and of science as an analogous intellectual territory; in both cases, progress was the unquestioned goal. Critic Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* supports this viewpoint in its tracing of American attitudes toward technology in the 19th century, a time during which the American landscape changed as the nation transitioned from an agrarian to an industrial economy. According to Marx, “[W]hen steamboats and factories and railroads were beginning to transform the native landscape, the idea of a unique affinity between America and the machine became popular” (“Two Kingdoms” 66). “America” and “technology” become synonymous not just for obvious reasons, like the widespread industrialization of the nation following the Civil War, but also because of the inherent relationship between the nation’s technological progress and the advancement of democratic ideals. The country attained and maintained economic independence from Europe largely due to technological achievements (Toumey 16) and then was able to safeguard this independence through the development of military technology. Thus, according to Thomas Parke Hughes, the post-Civil War period was the

¹²See also Thomas Parke Hughes, *American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm, 1870-1970*, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004). Hughes updates the 1989 edition of *American Genesis* to include the “Information Age” but does not mention 9/11, though he does note that the decrease in military spending he had earlier predicted did not come to pass, and instead, “we have recently seen a sizeable increase in the Pentagon’s budget to the level where U.S. military expenditures exceed those of Russia, Britain, France, and Germany combined” (x).

era of the American inventor, who, like a frontier explorer, conquered new intellectual territories and brought his spoils back to the homeland (*American Genesis* 1-7). In the decades prior to World War II, cultural associations between science, progress, democracy, and exploration gained prominence.

Not until after World War II, however, did the scientific frontier become the arena of national defense. While World War I and World War II are respectively referred to as the chemist's war and the physicist's war worldwide (Molella "Science" 109), the United States established itself as the clear leader in research and development through The Manhattan Project (Hughes 11), a large-scale nuclear defense project. According to Arthur Molella, head curator of the Smithsonian's *Science in American Life* exhibit, with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, "science positioned itself as a mainstay of national security" (110) while at the same time maintaining the equation of scientific research with the "frontier spirit" (110). That is, the "explorer" or "conquering hero" of the pre-wars scientific era became a defender of the nation in response to external threats. The Manhattan Project ushered in the era of "Big Science," which saw a dramatic increase in government funding for university and industrial research.¹³ What began with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was solidified with the beginning of the Cold War, when the implicit threat of nuclear attack from abroad meant that the nation required an unmatched defense system. According to Nelkin, the marriage between science and the state "had been forged at a time of extraordinary faith in science as the basis of technological progress. It was consummated . . . when economic growth and Cold War competition favored expansion of the scientific effort" (117). That is, a

¹³In the field of physics alone, "the federal government's demand for physicists rose on average 10 percent each year" between 1960 and 1968 (Kaiser 867).

technology-driven defense expanded during the Cold War not just because it needed to but also because it could; a lack of budget deficits and an export-based economy enabled the government to increase defense spending, which in turn fed the domestic industries that manufactured defense products.

The “industry” aspect of the “military-industrial complex” thus helped to encourage the public’s faith not just in technology but also in the positive economic benefits of the defense industry. While scientific research prior to World War II was characterized by the individual inventor working alone in his lab (Hughes), the Big Science period was characterized by a ballooning of all aspects of the research process: staffs became larger (while at the same time the work itself became individualized according to a factory model, with each scientist responsible for one part of a project); research moved from small private and university labs to larger industrial settings; and projects changed in tone from “pure” research to research driven by the quest for and fulfillment of funding demands. On the whole, these were seen as positive developments, since both industrial and academic labs were devoted to defense projects. However, some objections were raised among scientists, who feared the long-term effects of budget- and defense-driven research (Kaiser). While the counterargument certainly held true, that military and defense technologies were the rising tide that funded all endeavors, those researchers interested in “science for science’s sake” foresaw the possibility that government interests would curb rather than encourage the growth of “creative” science.¹⁴

¹⁴ According to Kaiser, “‘Suburban’ physics of the 1950s was often high quality and original--yet all the same, the horizon of ‘appropriate’ topics for training and research bore the marks of time and place [and so were generally limited to nuclear and solid-state physics, both of which were in demand in the industry and government, and for which training was much easier]” (880).

The government desired not just to fund science but also to engender in the public a respect for scientific research and a confidence in the ability of resulting technologies to defend the nation during the Cold War. In a 1944 letter to Vannevar Bush, quoted in Bush's 1945 "Report to the President" from the Office of Research and Development, then-president Roosevelt specifically asked Bush, "What can be done, consistent with military security, and with the prior approval of the military authorities, to make known to the world as soon as possible the contributions which have been made during our war effort to scientific knowledge?" That is, Roosevelt advocated the publicizing of the ways in which the nation's military and scientific efforts were interdependent and mutually beneficial. Roosevelt and Bush saw postwar scientific defense as a continuation of wartime military defense and public confidence as crucial to the "war" effort.

While the government clearly expressed its support for technological defense programs by increasing research and defense funding, the scientific community also worked to create a positive association between science and the national defense in the public eye. According to Molella, "[T]he American scientific community adopted what historian Ronald Tobey (1971) has called an 'American ideology of national science,' a broad strategy of political action and popularization designed to identify the scientific enterprise with the national interest. . . . Above all, scientists promoted science as the only true foundation of national security" (qtd. In Molella "Exhibiting" 38). Support for Molella's argument can be found by examining how the scientific community represents itself in the postwar era. In *The Maturing of American Science* (1974), Robert Kargon collects the yearly addresses by the presidents of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) to its members for select years between World War II

and 1970. Though without direct political affiliations, the AAAS presidents speak to the intersection of science, politics, and culture; as such, the speeches overwhelmingly express a belief that national security depends on scientific and technological supremacy. In his 1944 address, “What Science Requires of the New World,” Arthur Compton states, “We have in science a powerful weapon with which to fight our war for freedom. If the powers in control will be vigilant . . . science and technology are giving us a world in which a stable peace can probably be maintained” (Kargon 102). Compton’s statement outlines the dominant view of the relationship between science and security in the postwar period. In “The Common Ground of Science and Politics” (1952), Kirtley F. Mather shifts focus slightly in light of the general ethos of the decade, which emphasized peacetime growth and prosperity. He thus praises increased federal funding for universities and industry as well as the “better living through science” engendered by technological advancements (Kargon 114).

U.S. scientific and technological supremacy went unchallenged in public discourse until the launch of Sputnik in 1957, at which point the AAAS scrambled to determine its position in light of losing the first round of the space race. Paul B. Sears’ “The Inexorable Problem of Space” (1957) acknowledges this loss, stating, “We are beginning to sense that the elaborate technology to which we are so thoroughly committed makes us peculiarly vulnerable” (138) but he nonetheless argues for a commitment to “the ideals of our civilization” (138). In other words, an overemphasis on technological prowess leaves the nation open to the threat of Communism when technology fails: nevertheless scientific pursuits cannot be abandoned, lest the nation be overtaken by more technologically successful others. In less than a decade, however,

criticism of the nation's defense-related projects became more widespread as the use of research to support military technology in the unpopular Vietnam War became apparent (204). On the whole, concerns mounted regarding the human and environmental effects of military technologies in Vietnam as well as of the military's control (via funding) of basic and applied research (204). Responding to the new criticism, Don K. Price's "Purists and Politicians" (1968) both predates and prefigures what became known as the Science Wars. Addressing criticisms waged against science departments by a vocal Left housed mainly in humanities departments, Price states, "If the danger comes from the humanities, however, it comes not because they are politically powerful but, rather, because . . . they may have convinced scientists themselves that science is an inhumane discipline" (211). Here Price openly acknowledges the political and sometimes personal battles on campuses where military defense research, funded by the government, seemed at odds with the "nonquantifiable qualities of *humanitas* outside the domain of exact science" concerned with "redemption" rather than "the complete alienation and dehumanization of man" (210).¹⁵ Price answers these criticisms by saying that scientists share the concerns voiced by those in the humanities, but he wills researchers to remain committed to both their work and the values of defense and supremacy that the work represents, saying, "the advancement of science would lead to the progress of technology and industry and an increase in material prosperity" (222). Yet his mention of budget cuts—the first mention of a decrease in funding since the beginning of the postwar boom—demonstrates a shift away from unwavering government and societal support of

¹⁵ Here Price quotes, first, Herbert Marcuse and, second, Erich Fromm, as figureheads for the general criticisms aimed at the ways in which university science departments funded their research, as well as the ends to which that research was put.

science. At the same time, the first major challenges to pro-science rhetoric, including the anti-war and -environmental movements, begin to surface.

A reading of the AAAS statements from the beginning of the Cold War through the years before the narrative of a national scientific defense is more widely questioned demonstrates the scientific community's commitment to creating a positive perception of the role of technology in the national defense. But how did the public read both the government's and the scientific community's efforts? The nation's perception of the military-industrial complex was not unthinkingly positive at this time. In fact, the public feared the "omnipotence of science" (Cholakov 124) and believed that unchecked scientific progress would lead to disaster if unleashed in the "wrong direction." The images of the destruction of Japan both buoyed an American sense of its military dominance while at the same time encouraging a nascent fear that science had suddenly overstepped its bounds—a fear that scientists themselves also shared. As cultural historian Elaine Tyler May explains, "Atomic energy presented a fundamental contradiction: science had developed the potential for total technological mastery as well as for total technological devastation" (May 23). The development and use of the atomic bomb called into question long-standing narratives of the inherent goodness of science.

However, prior to the more devastating period of the Vietnam War, this fear remained an undercurrent to an overwhelming belief in the power of science to drive domestic progress and increase military strength.¹⁶ Scientific victories were described in the "morale-boosting, optimistic rhetoric" that had once been used to describe military

¹⁶As I will explore later, not until the 1970s did the balance of this sentiment shift. Nevertheless, cultural phenomena such as the bomb shelter boom of the 1950s (May 3) demonstrate a fear of new technologies concomitant with a belief in their strength and necessity.

victories, as the American press shifted its coverage from military offense to scientific defense (Gregory 38). Historian Jane Gregory describes the 1950s and 1960s as a “boom time for science coverage” in American newspapers, with an emphasis on public scientific literacy growing after Sputnik (38-39). The culture industry thus supported the work of the defense industry. Likewise, Arthur Molella notes that once Big Science became “identified with the imperatives of national security, scientists enjoyed unprecedented public esteem” (“Science” 110). This esteem is reflected in a rush of graduate students to physics programs, documented by David Kaiser in “The Postwar Suburbanization of American Physics.” Students were initially drawn to these programs by the increased availability of both academic funding and academic/industrial employment, but they stayed for what Kaiser describes as the promise of a suburban lifestyle. Students saw scientific careers as providing a route to “the comforts of a ‘normal,’ well-rounded, middle-class life” (Kaiser 871).¹⁷ Labs like Lawrence Livermore and Raytheon actively recruited graduates by emphasizing the material comforts provided by well-paying suburban research facilities.

Vannevar Bush describes scientific research at the beginning of the Big Science period as “key to our security as a nation, to our better health, to more jobs, to a higher standard of living, and to our cultural progress” (“Report”). The combined efforts of the government and the scientific community succeeded in convincing the public that the nation’s safety and economic well being depended on its technological strength.

¹⁷Both Molella’s and Kaiser’s arguments are supported by Bernard Barber’s *Science and the Social Order* (1952). Barber describes high public regard for scientific professions coupled with relatively higher wages for research scientists (143-188).

Although this perception would be challenged in the later decades of the twentieth century, it would return full force after the attacks of September 11th.

Challenges to Science (1970 – 2001)

As delineated in the previous section of this chapter, following World War II a narrative describing the positive relationship between technology and the national defense quickly developed. Both the government and the scientific community worked to imbue in the public the belief that the nation's technological superiority would ensure its safety. However, beginning in the 1970s science began to lose its esteemed place in national culture because of at least three factors: the technological violence wrought by Vietnam, the end of the Cold War, and the questions raised by the project of postmodernism.

Industry-driven nuclear defense of the nation consistently met with objections from a succession of anti-war movements. Scientists themselves also warned against the dangers of realized technological dreams. The development of the Manhattan Project, for example, met with objection from researchers who witnessed the testing phase of atomic weaponry and wished to stop its deployment. Even smaller-scale military innovations, such as advances in explosives, were derided as early as the late 19th century. However, the notion that advanced technology could do more harm than good became the rule rather than the exception during the Vietnam War. As historian Douglas Kellner explains, the war “showed the pretensions and flaws of the project of modernity” because it “revealed the limitations of the modern paradigm of technocratic domination of nature and other people through the use of science” (qtd. in Hammond 69). Once the cultural

perception of science moved from one of respect for pure research to one of suspicion of the relationship between science and the state, a sea change occurred in the nation's desire to idealize science. As Andrew Ross explains, "Nothing belies the myth of pure science more than the evidence that it has served as the handmaiden of warfare or . . . as a central component of the permanent war economy that continues to sustain elite interests among the major powers and their clients" (Ross 311). That is, the perception of science changed from one of an independent body whose tools were used in the national defense to one of a research body whose methods and goals had become indistinguishable from those of the state. Moreover, the project of scientific research was seen as shifting from self-sustaining to state-dependent, and from there it was an easy jump, as Ross notes, to imagine that it was in the scientific community's best interest to participate in endless wars rather than to find a way to bring conflicts to an end. In short, the myth of "science for the science's sake" crumbled at this time, and the notion of a technology-based defense of the nation came under suspicion precisely because of the marriage of science and the defense industry. The environmental and anti-nuclear movements of the 1970s also contributed to the public's movement away from a trust in science, as both movements pointed to the ways in which technology was harmful even when not used in military offensives (Marx "Afterword" 494).

While it tarnished the public's perception of "good" science, Vietnam did locate a common national "enemy," communism, which it aimed to contain. While military technology might not be ethically employed, the argument went, it was nonetheless necessary to preserve national security. With the fall of communist governments worldwide and the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, that common enemy was lost,

leaving behind a national defense project without the dangers that justified its existence. The fracturing of the science-state relationship that began in the Vietnam era thus came to a breaking point at the end of the Cold War, when the grand narrative of *Democracy vs. Communism* likewise began to dissolve. As critic Phil Hammond explains, “Put at its simplest, the West has lost its cohesion because it has lost its enemy. [...] Western elites have lost the political wherewithal to cohere their own societies around a meaningful project and to give them a sense of a future goal” (2). Because a technology-based defense was conceived primarily in response to that threat, it too lost its “meaningful project” and “future goal.”

While the end of the Cold War and the failures of Vietnam posed real-world challenges to the nation’s technological supremacy, just as important were the theoretical challenges presented by postmodernism.¹⁸ The main challenge posed by postmodern theories is one of epistemology. The project of science is to refine knowledge and to move closer to certain absolute truths while acknowledging that ground can be lost and gained along the way (i.e. that theories can be tested, disproven, and revised). The postmodern project, at its simplest, denies the existence of absolutes and centers, thus calling into question the goal of scientific research to move toward stable, definite knowledge. In *European Integration and the Postmodern Condition*, Peter van Ham explains that postmodernism challenges the very project of scientific knowledge production. While “modern ways of thinking” assume that scientific knowledge is the product of linear thinking and the accumulation of stores of information (8), the

¹⁸ I draw on Phil Hammond’s definition of postmodernism offered in *Media, War and Postmodernity*. Building on Lyotard’s definition, “‘incredulity toward metanarratives,’” Hammond writes that “postmodernism is an attitude: one which rejects grand narratives purporting to explain historical reality” (xiii). This definition points to postmodernism’s challenges to American narratives of technological/defense supremacy.

postmodern mindset not only undermines the primacy given to linearity in Western culture but also goes so far as to “[argue] that the current accumulation of knowledge actually produces uncertainty” (10). That is, far from the notion that research leads to progress and ultimately truth, postmodern theories see the accumulation of knowledge as resulting in multiple, competing “truths.” Moreover, this thinking objects to the image of the modern scientist as a rational being free from the pull of value judgments and opinions, especially concerning the government: “Modern science has traditionally justified the normative positions of any government it has served, using ‘scientific facts’ as the blunt weapons of its discourse to silence the dissenting voices of those who do not live up to their formal standards of inquiry” (10). Van Ham’s rhetoric reveals how postmodern theories work to undercut the notion of science as pure and objective precisely because that image allows for an untainted relationship between research and military defense, a relationship that had come under question by the 1970s.

The tension between the scientific and humanities communities came to a head in the 1990s Science Wars, an intellectual battle between science and humanities scholars.¹⁹ The most famous conflict concerned the Sokal Hoax, Professor Alan Sokal’s successful attempt to publish a complex but bogus article in *Social Text*, a postmodern studies journal. His article, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” (1996), examined a physics concept from a postmodern standpoint. While written in a voice common to science studies scholarship, the article contained many clues and jokes that only could have been discerned by a physics scholar (whose peer-review the journal failed to seek before publishing the

¹⁹ Segerstrale actually dates the Science Wars to the 1960s, writing “from the proscience activists’ point of view, the Science Wars probably started much earlier—some three decades ago with the rise of the social constructivist paradigm in science studies (and in the humanities, with the rise of postmodernism)” (2).

essay). Sokal claimed that the exercise proved the vapidness of humanities scholarship, while those on the other side claimed that Sokal abused an ethic of trust inherent in academic publishing, likening his attempt to publish fake scholarship to plagiarism. Volleys between humanities and science scholars were collected in several books, most famously Gross and Levitt's *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (1994).

While the Science Wars were filled with much emotion and airing of grievances that dated back to C.P. Snow's 1959 explanation of the "two cultures," they do provide evidence of the ways in which the sometimes difficult relationship between science and postmodern theories reached a breaking point in the decades following the Vietnam War. That the scientific community chose to respond to the challenges of postmodernism demonstrates the degree to which those challenges were taken seriously, especially in terms of their effects on the public. That is, just as postmodernism affects the "doing" of science (science scholarship), it also impacts the "saying" of science (e.g. representations of research and development in American culture). Molella notes that the public perceptions of science scholarship motivated the disagreements over the Smithsonian's inclusions of certain exhibits, such as the Enola Gay. The ACS, who funded the exhibit, argued for an overall "positive" view of science, with an emphasis on the uncontested contributions of science. The historians of science, with whom Molella generally sided, argued for a more nuanced approach that acknowledged the questionable aspects of such contributions as the atom bomb. According to Molella, "issues of American identity and nationalism figured importantly, if below the surface, in the disputes over artifacts and

ideas in *Science in American Life*. Adverse reaction ranged from frustrated nationalism to a sense of alienation from the general culture” (“Science” 112).

At stake here is the story of science, the way in which seemingly objective and verifiable historical facts, such as those about the development of atomic warfare, become shaped into an understandable narrative.²⁰ This particular dispute between Molella and his colleagues was eventually rectified, but only after extensive negotiations regarding exactly how the relationship between science and government would be represented. In visitor studies of the exhibit, Molella found that, in fact, “the public who came to SAL held science and technology in high regard” (“Exhibiting” 45). He postulates that September 11th will strengthen the relationship between science and society, writing, “What the full implications of September 11, 2001 will be for the public view of science, I cannot say...but at the very least they affirm the need for communication, revealing a public desperate for rational understanding and anxious to connect with their scientific and medical communities in times of crisis” (45). Here Molella acknowledges the cultural condition following 9/11, discussed below, in which postmodern questions of science’s access to truth were put aside.

Despite the cultural perception that postmodernism and science are practically incompatible, there has been a call in recent years for a postmodern science, at least among those in the humanities. According to Cathryn Carson, a postmodern approach to science would move away from “the spectatorial posture of the scientist as detached and indifferent onlooker” and toward an acknowledgement of “the scientist’s inextricable involvement in the world as participant and agent” (Carson 638). While the scientific community has not taken up Carson’s call, another contribution from the postmodern

²⁰ See Chapter Two for a more in-depth discussion of history as story.

critique of science has been a reevaluation of Islamic science, a point that is especially salient following September 11th. Cultural critic Ziauddin Sardar's "Above, Beyond, and at the Center of the Science Wars: A Postcolonial Reading" explains that the West's myth of technological supremacy finds its roots in an early modern desire to "forget" Islam's contributions to Western science (126). This "post-Columbus warfare of science" (120) "promoted the assumption that science gives truth and is the only way to truth, and that the truth accumulates as a single, universal perspective of Western civilization" (127). That is, Western science can only make its claims to access to absolute truth if it ignores the existence of non-Western science. He thus considers Western science a form of cultural imperialism, especially when it is "applied" in non-First World contexts without regard to existing methods and technologies (126). According to Sardar, the non-First World resists totalizing narratives of Western science, and postcolonial historians of science aim "to replace the grand narrative of Western science and give voice to non-Western discourses of science and learning" (130). Postmodern theories thus encourage the acknowledgement of additional scientific discourses, thereby undermining the power of a single, unified, dominant Western science. How that discourse was received following 9/11 is discussed below.

Post-9/11 Critiques of Postmodernism

Postmodern critiques have challenged science in the post-Cold War era by calling into question the existence of independently verifiable truths. Following the events of September 11th, however, the postmodern viewpoint was itself called into question, with critics primarily from the Right arguing that, once under the threat of international

terrorism, the interrogation of absolutes and the call for cultural relativism could only further endanger the United States. This section reviews the general response to the postmodern worldview after 9/11 before exploring how the critiques of postmodernism and relativism impact the contemporary reception of science. Following 9/11, the cultural critiques of science offered by postmodernism are all but abandoned, as the United States returns to post-1945 funding models for scientific research and development and an adherence to Big Science-era myths regarding U.S. technological supremacy.

In general, the immediate cultural response to 9/11 was of two minds: condemnation without question, and condemnation with an attempt at contextualization. George F. Will's "The End of our Holiday from History" represents the first viewpoint. In anticipation of the Left's response to the attacks, Will writes, "[D]emocracies are sometimes plagued by bad sociology and bad philosophy feeding upon each other. From the false idea that extreme action must have justification in the social environment, it is but a short intellectual stagger to the equally false idea that such acts can and should be eliminated by appeasement torted up as reasonableness" ("Holiday"). Will argues that attempts to understand the attacks are symptomatic of wrong-thinking and weakness; without doubt, Americans have been attacked "because of their virtues -- principally democracy, and loyalty to those nations that, like Israel, are embattled salients of our virtues in a still-dangerous world" ("Holiday"). He thus calls for a revitalization of large-scale homeland defense organizations in order to prevent future attacks.

Responses from the American Left differ markedly. A week after the attacks, Susan Sontag, arguing for contextualization, calls 9/11 "an attack on the world's self-

proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and action” (“Talk”). For her, an appropriate response requires a deep consideration of the socio-political circumstances that led to the event: “Let's by all means grieve together. But let's not be stupid together. A few shreds of historical awareness might help us understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen.” Likewise, Noam Chomsky advocates for a response “that would try to ascertain Bin Laden's views, and the sentiments of the large reservoir of supporters he has throughout the region” (“Interviewing”). Sontag and Chomsky represent the Left’s call to consider the United States not as an exceptional nation above reproach but as an equal player on the world stage. Moreover, while these voices argue that the nation certainly did not deserve an attack on its civilians, they do invite the nation to consider how its manner of being in the world might engender animosity and to attempt a more measured response that would acknowledge blame rather than apply blunt force to the “evil doers” whose critique was valid even though their method was not.

The backlash against Sontag, Chomsky, and others ranged from mild to extreme. In *The Terror Dream* Susan Faludi details the response to Sontag: “The New Republic ranked Sontag with Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. Former New Republic editor Andrew Sullivan called her an ‘ally of evil’ and ‘deranged.’ Yet another New York Post columnist, John Podhoretz, said she suffered from ‘moral idiocy’” (Faludi 27). These opinions were mild compared to that of columnist Rod Dreher, who wanted “to grab [Sontag] by the neck, drag her down to ground zero and force her to say that to the firefighters” (qtd. in Faludi 27). Beyond the clear gendering of the conflict evident in Dreher’s column (which implies that Sontag, a comfortable and well-protected woman,

has no right to speak about an attack that endangers male military and civilian responders), these responses make it clear that, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, any calls for understanding of historical context were met with near-irrational appeals to the need for justice and security.

Yet, despite the multi-voiced call for contextualization evident on the Left, commentators announced “the end” of cultural relativism. According to journalist Edward Rothstein, “This destruction seems to cry out for a transcendent ethical perspective. And even mild relativism seems troubling in contrast. It focuses on the symmetries between violations. But differences, say, between democracies and absolutist societies or between types of armed conflict are essential now” (“Attacks”). By seeking counternarratives and explanations, postmodern and postcolonial theories challenge the sanctity of the event and undermine national security. As Rothstein explains, “the rejections of universal values and ideals leave little room for unqualified condemnations of a terrorist attack, particularly one against the West. Such an attack, however inexcusable, can be seen as a horrifying airing of a legitimate cultural grievance” (“Attacks”). According to Will, the nation is more in danger from postmodernism than from terrorism “because its agenda is to discredit ideas that make nobility intelligible and hence heroism possible” (“So We Fight”). Yet, according to Will and others, 9/11 put an end to the postmodern agenda and its relativist thought project. Calling postmodernism “the faux sophistication of some homegrown thinking” in a reference to domestic terrorism, Will claims that “[t]he postmodern plague of quotation marks—the punctuation of disparagement that labels as superstitions ‘virtue’ and ‘heroism’ and most of the other things that make life worth living—was erased by men running into burning buildings”

(“So We Fight”). Likewise, relativism “was incinerated by burning jet fuel,” the implication being that the culture of the United States surpasses all others because it does not create citizens who would perform acts of terrorism.

The criticisms launched by Will, Rothstein, and others are not entirely misplaced, given that the Left’s attempt to explain the roots of the attacks could be misunderstood as legitimizing them. However, according to Stanley Fish, postmodernism’s acknowledgement of equal and opposite standpoints does not mean that an explanation of motives for the attacks stands as an excuse; likewise, explaining the motives does not place them above reproach. According to Fish, even though “ [postmodernism’s] critique of master narrative deprives us of a mechanism for determining which of two more fiercely held beliefs is true,” “you assert that your universal is the true one, even though your adversaries clearly do not accept it, and you do not attribute their recalcitrance to insanity or mere criminality but to the fact, regrettable as it may be, that they are in the grip of a set of beliefs that is false” (“Postmodern Warfare”). What Fish argues here, over and against most contemporary understandings of postmodernism, is that relativism does not deprive one of the conviction that one’s own viewpoint is the right one, though it does prevent one from extending or enforcing that “rightness” universally.²¹ While this would appear to his detractors as a mere splitting of hairs, to Fish and others who attempt to preserve the postmodern sensibility in the post-9/11 age, the attacks do not negate the absence of an absolute and verifiable “truth,” no matter how strongly held the belief that

²¹In “A Reply to My Critics,” Fish writes, “It is important to distinguish our ‘belief that our values are universal’ . . . from the belief that the universality of our values could be universally established,” (64), phrased also as a difference between “absolute conviction and the possession of an absolute . . . proof of it” (64). This explanation comes under attack, nowhere more clearly than in the “Can Postmodernists Condemn Terrorism?” special section of *The Responsive Community* in which Fish’s “A Reply to My Critics” is published.

the attacks were absolutely wrong. This is in fact the same standpoint David Novak calls for in “‘America-Friendly’ Relativism Isn’t Good Enough” when he writes, “We have to believe now as we had to believe [during World War II] that we are right, not only for ourselves but for all others as well” (47). By referencing World War II, which exists in the public imagination as more “absolutely” right than any other war, Novak implicitly ties the project of fighting terrorism to the project of fighting fascism and borrows from that war its legitimacy. That even the most “radical” of American theorists reinterpret postmodern thought as allowing for a belief “that your universal is the true one” is quite telling; though postmodernism is clearly not dead, it continues on in a version that allows for the condemnation of the attacks.

Cultural historians have found this particular turn in postmodern thinking quite surprising. Howard Zinn, for example, expresses dismay at liberal personal and cultural responses to the event: “9/11 had a powerful psychological effect on everybody in America, and for certain liberal intellectuals a kind of hysterical reaction has distorted their ability to think clearly about our nation’s role in the world” (“The Power and the Glory”). While Zinn believes the attacks occasion a rethinking of American exceptionalism, a liberal form of exceptionalism is in fact much more common, as evidenced by this claim from *The American Prospect*: “liberals have to offer an alternative capable of dislodging neoconservatism as the nation’s governing ideology. That alternative can embrace, in our view, both a commitment to building an international structure of cooperation and a recognition that, where terrorism is concerned, preemptive, unilateral, and decisive force may be legitimate” (Kuttner). This idea is not unlike Fukuyama’s call for downplayed dominance; moreover, it maintains a

belief in America's exceptional status both in its right to military action and its responsibility to uphold democratic ideals.

September 11th and Scientific Practice

George Will's critique of postmodernism makes clear that more than just the "thought problem" of relativism is at stake after September 11th. According to its detractors, relativism represents a real danger to the United States' ability to defend itself against future attacks; to some, as Will intimates, it is even a form of domestic terrorism. Specifically, the sense of danger arises directly from the belief that postmodernism undermines the foundational mythology of the United States, namely that the United States is the world's model of political, social, and technological perfection. While these myths have been continually challenged almost since their inception, and especially since the Vietnam era, they came closest to being destroyed on September 11th.

The 9/11 attacks directly negate the notion of a peerless national defense system supported by technological supremacy. As critic Deems Morrione notes, "one cannot help being struck by the trauma of the disappearance of modernity itself—the collision of two of its great technological achievements, seized from their masters and utilized to bring about their own destruction" (158). Postmodern challenges to nationalist discourse, including the questioning of scientific truth during the Science Wars, thus constitute another threat to national security. Moreover, the attacks symbolically enact relativism's use of logic against itself in that a technological device destroys a monument to technology and symbol of supremacy (WTC). As Morrione argues, "the Other, meant to take inspiration from the iconography of post-World War II modernity embodied by the

Twin Towers, ruptured the symbols of technological perfection with its own tools” (158). In these terms, the attack on the Trade Center epitomizes postcolonial politics: the master’s tools literally destroy the master’s house.

In response to the threats, real and imagined, posed by terrorism and postmodernism, the post-9/11 nation began to reassert its claim to technological supremacy. In order to refute the challenges that had been mounted against it since the Vietnam-era, academic and industrial science returned to Cold War models of defense budgeting and increased funding for security-related applied research. If the cuts to funding for the Superconducting Super Collider typified the post-Cold War era, then the revitalization of the atomic-age labs, like California’s Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, typify the post-9/11 era. According to Stephen Handelman, “Washington has marshaled the U.S. science establishment on a scale not seen since Sputnik. Federal investment in homeland-defense research has swallowed nearly \$4 billion since 2003” (33).²² Not surprisingly, the technologies invented in the years immediately following 9/11 had direct application to the defense of borders, infrastructure, and commerce. Lawrence Livermore, for example, created a “cargo car wash” that “uses a neutron beam to detect gamma rays that may be emanating from cargo containers” (Handelman 34). Raytheon, another of the major Cold War industrial labs, created a comprehensive airport security system (34). Journalist Andrew Bacevich directly ties post-9/11 military spending trends to those trends seen during the Cold War, including the doubling of the

²²As was the case during the Sputnik-era increases in funding, nearly all of the funding has been allocated for applied rather than basic research. According to a National Academy of Science report, while research and development budgets have slightly increased each year since 2001, “97 percent of the increase is focused in two areas: defense weapons development and human space exploration technologies” (National Research Council 69).

Pentagon's budget to \$700 billion/year over the past decade. He writes, "In the five decades since Eisenhower left the White House...much has changed. The Soviet Union has disappeared. So too, for all practical purposes, has Communism itself. Yet in Washington, an aura of never-ending crisis still prevails—and with it, [a constant-war mindset]." On the whole, the post-9/11 era was marked by a return to Big Science-style funding for research and development of counter-terrorism measures.

Alongside technological advances in defense and surveillance, the scientific community likewise worked to revamp its image after 9/11. Following the Vietnam War, the association between technology and national defense was negative; rather than "safety" or "progress," science represented human and environmental devastation. To counter this perception, leading organizations, including the AAAS and the National Science Foundation (NSF), released statements emphasizing the once and future role of technology in national defense. In a 2002 speech to the Brookings Institute, Rita Colwell, then director of the NSF, called on the scientific and engineering community to come to the nation's defense against threats of "airline safety, contamination by disease, failure of communication links, poisoning of food and drinking water, assessment of damaged infrastructure, and countless other concerns . . ." ("Before and After"). While the role of science in Cold War era defense was mainly limited to the development and production of large-scale defense weaponry, the makers of post-9/11 science policy see a more wide-ranging role for science, not just in the production of weapons but also in the defense of communications and transportation infrastructure. More importantly, Colwell asserted the notion that the scientific community is uniquely suited to the task of imagining new offensive and defensive technologies: "We now recognize that we also must draw on one

of science's most potent capacities—prediction. If we can predict, we frequently can prevent" ("Before and After"). In other words, in the face of a nebulous threat, it falls to researchers not just to defend against all possible forms of terrorism but also to imagine and thus prepare for them before they happen. Scientific research, she argues, and the subsequent production of new knowledge lead to a strong national defense.

Not to invest in science almost assures that the nation will be surpassed by enemies and neutral competitors alike. Citing the "public hysteria" that surrounded the anthrax attacks of 2001, Colwell calls for a more literate public, a task which falls both to schools (also charged with readying students to join the field of technological defense) and the media, whose publication of popular science articles greatly declined since the Sputnik-era boom. Colwell's remarks represent the general tenor of the scientific community's reaction to September 11th.²³ Acknowledging the downturn in not just government funding but also public opinion of science following the Vietnam War, scientists call for a return to post-World War II funding models. Of greater significance to this study, however, is that they also call for the positive cultural work, including better journalism and more rigorous education, which would return science to lauded public standing. Colwell and others do not completely ignore criticisms of technology (the practical concerns of the anti-nuclear and pro-environment movements and the philosophical concerns of postmodern theory). Rather, they argue that the threat of terrorism, which not only solidifies the nation against a common enemy but also places

²³See also Lewis M. Branscomb, "The Changing Relationship between Science and Government Post-September 11," *Science and Technology in a Vulnerable World*, Ed. Albert H. Teich, Stephen D. Nelson, and Stephen J. Lita, (Washington, DC, AAAS, 2002).

science at the forefront of defense, requires that the critical dialogue be momentarily suspended.

The results of the return to traditional dialogues on technology and defense are exemplified in a series of articles in *The Atlantic* that appeared in 2002 and 2009. Written less than a year after 9/11, Michael Kelly's June 2002 piece, "The American Way of War," recalls the success of the Gulf War in his praise of the months-earlier Afghanistan campaign. He praises the Smart Bomb technology of that war, noting that "The accuracy of the bombing was extraordinary" and that the United States suffered only 146 casualties. Meanwhile, an unknown number of civilians (Kelly says "not many") were killed in a war where less than 10 percent of bombs missed their targets. Not surprisingly, the accuracy and abilities of the military increased greatly in the following decade, with "weapons operating at extremely long ranges, hitting targets with unprecedented precision, and relying as never before on gigabytes of targeting information gathered on the ground, in the air, and from space" ("American Way"). Writing in 2002, it appeared to Kelly as if technology had won the war; the Taliban fell, 17 Americans were killed, and a "remarkably low" number of between 1000 and 3000 civilians were killed. He writes that "With its twelve nuclear aircraft-carrier battle groups (no other nation has anything even remotely comparable), its stealth bombers, its cruise missiles, its remarkable global guidance and communications systems...the United States stands alone in the world and in history. No nation before has possessed any force like this; no other nation possesses any force like it now, or any force capable of sustained defense against it" ("American Way").

From the vantage point of more than a decade and an unending war later,²⁴ Kelly seems remarkably naïve, but his naiveté is telling. In 2002, it looked like technology would win the war as it had before, regardless of the fact that the country employed traditional forms of defense against nontraditional opponents.²⁵ That the war could not be so easily won is clear now. The apparent quagmire developing in Afghanistan prompted Mark Bowden's March 2009 piece, "The Last Ace," which examines what it means for the government to choose not to devote a great amount of money to replacing the military's F-15s with F-22s. While the article acknowledges that the nation's air supremacy could not save it from "men armed with box cutters," it argues that the nation's safety relies as much on perception as reality. That is, for the country not to arm itself to the technologically-possible hilt is to accept that it might not maintain its dominance over traditional enemies that still pose a threat. Citing various instabilities in Georgia, Russia, China, and North Korea, he writes, "Conflict with these nations isn't inevitable or even necessarily probable, but as we become more vulnerable in the air, it may well become more likely" ("Last Ace"). A combination of unsurpassed technology that won existing conflicts and the ability of that technology to deter additional engagements, Bowden argues, has allowed the United States to remain a superpower. Though the necessary technology exists to maintain that status, the government's reluctance to use it puts the nation in jeopardy. Bowden's article thus reveals a return to

²⁴ As of this writing, a near-full withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan is planned for 2014. However, the United States is expected to maintain a military "presence" in the country indefinitely.

²⁵ Afghanistan provides a good example of the type of war Phil Hammond describes when he says that, "war and intervention since the Cold War have been driven by attempts on the part of Western leaders to recapture a sense of purpose and meaning, both for themselves and for their societies" (xix). Using "symmetrical" weaponry in an asymmetrical war typifies the United States' attempt to reassert its Cold-War era military and technological dominance.

Cold War-era definitions of supremacy and safety that depend on traditional research and technologies, despite acknowledging that asymmetrical warfare renders those tools useless.

Exceptional Surveillance

While the return to traditional research and development in the defense sector might have been expected, the attacks were also used to justify a significant and unexpected increase in the scope of both foreign and domestic surveillance. In June of 2013, former NSA contractor Edward Snowden revealed that the United States developed two surveillance programs, PRISM and XKeyscore, designed to seize internet-generated data at both the micro and macro level. On the micro level, PRISM allows the NSA direct access to data from major internet companies. According to tech journalist Brian Barrett, “Its stated purpose is to monitor potentially valuable foreign communications that might pass through US servers, but it appears that in practice its scope was far greater” (“What is PRISM?”). Importantly, however, PRISM at least requires the NSA to ask for specific data regarding a person or persons, after which point search and mail companies such as Facebook, Microsoft, or Google must “hand over access to their servers—and the tremendous wealth of data and communiqués that passes through them every day—to the FBI’s Data Intercept Technology Unit, which in turn relays it to the NSA” (“What is PRISM”).

XKeyscore, on the other hand, requires no such specific request aimed at a “person of interest.” Rather, the surveillance system essentially archives the entire internet, making a searchable database of metadata about nearly everyone who communicates with anyone, worldwide. Journalist Mark Clayton calls XKeyscore the

“‘widest-reaching’ Internet surveillance system.... An analyst has to enter only an individual e-mail address – along with a ‘justification’ inserted into another field on the screen – to get a trove of personal e-mail sorted by time period.... The program can also apparently determine which computers visited a website and when, as well as searching chats, usernames, buddy lists, and cookies” (“What is XKeyscore”). According to the documents released by Snowden, “the program lets analysts see ‘nearly everything a typical user does on the Internet’” (“What is XKeyscore”). As a result, XKeyscore stores “about 41 billion records” per month and maintains these records in the event that they should one day become necessary to an investigation.

This figure, 41 billion records, is difficult to imagine, and even more so when one considers that, despite being virtual, data requires real, physical storage space and large, fast computers to sort and search it. PRISM and XKeyscore therefore required computing technology to advance significantly before they could be implemented. Commentator Bill Davidowjan explains that the growth of programs like XKeyscore are enabled by the ever-decreasing costs of computing technology that have occurred as surveillance has moved from human- to machine-labor: “In 1965 Gordon Moore observed that the number of transistors on a single chip had doubled every year since the invention of the integrated circuit in 1958. . . . If the capability of surveillance systems were to increase at this rate, in ten years a dollars’ worth of today’s surveillance could be bought for fractions of a penny. Applications that were not feasible at a dollar suddenly are practical. These types of advances made the NSA collection of metadata feasible” (“With Great Computing Power Comes Great Surveillance”). As Davidowjan explains, the cheaper the computer, the better (and more ubiquitous) the surveillance. Formerly high-cost technologies like

facial recognition now power both airport scanners and the programs that allow Facebook to auto-tag users' faces in photographs. According to Davidowjan, in the future, "Disparate pieces of our personal puzzle will be brought together in monstrously large databases. Big data analysis tools will combine the bits and pieces to create a full picture of who we are, where we go, what we read and watch, what we do, and what we like. . . . Almost everything about us will be known or predicted" ("With Great Computing"). Davidowjan's language sounds almost like dystopian science fiction, except for the fact that his scenario is based on a logical application of Moore's Law. Moreover, his description of big data analysis roughly matches what XKeyscore already provides the NSA: a fairly complete picture of online actions that reflect the lives of the humans who perform them.

Once the technology became available, then, PRISM and XKeyscore were implemented around 2007, but the concepts were publicly known to be a part of the government's surveillance plan for at least five years prior to that time. In a 2002 *New York Times* article titled "Pentagon Plans a Computer System That Would Peek at Personal Data of Americans," journalist John Markoff reported the Pentagon's plan for "a vast electronic dragnet."²⁶ While the plan was never widely used domestically, it clearly forms the basis for the NSA's programs. Markoff describes a program that would "provide intelligence analysts and law enforcement officials with instant access to information from Internet mail and calling records to credit card and banking transactions

²⁶ To be clear, Markoff's article describes a specifically domestic version of the surveillance system (named Total Information Awareness) that would eventually become the PRISM and XKeyscore programs. Faced with great criticism once it was announced, the Pentagon's program was shut down, but the technologies that were already in development were transferred to the NSA's foreign surveillance arena in 2003 (Associated Press "Pentagon's 'Terror Information Awareness' Program Will End").

and travel documents, without a search warrant” (“Pentagon Plans”). The notion of a warrantless search clearly conflicts with even the loosest definition of constitutionally protected privacy rights in the United States, but as Markoff notes, the government initially claimed that the September 11th attacks justified the need for increased surveillance.²⁷ Indeed, as ACLU legal director Steven Shapiro notes, ““There is always a rejigging of security and privacy in wars. . . . The implicit understanding is that when the war is over we’ll go back to normal”” (qtd. in Hardy, “Privacy in the War without End”). The problem is that there is no clear end to the need for mass surveillance when the justification (terrorism) and the enemy (nonstate) remain open-ended and undefined.

Moreover, privacy laws have not kept pace with the growth of surveillance technologies. As columnist Bob Sullivan explains in “Why Metadata Snooping is Legal,” the spirit of the law may be at risk in the implementation of PRISM and XKeyscore, but the NSA has not violated the Constitutional rights of Americans precisely because the Fourth Amendment cannot clearly be applied to metadata-gathering: “In the digital world, the line between knocking on your door and barging in is much more complicated. . . . Americans lose their expectation of privacy, the court reasoned, whenever they voluntarily give information to a third party, such as a phone company. Telling the phone company who you call by dialing a number is enough to surrender your expectation of privacy that you are contacting that person” (“Why Metadata Snooping is Legal”).

²⁷ Interestingly, one of Markoff’s sources who favors increased surveillance despite the potential threat they pose to civil liberties is Philip Zelikow, one of *The 9/11 Report*’s historians. On the subject of surveillance he states, “They have a pretty good vision of the need to make the tradeoffs in favor of more sharing and openness.” Markoff calls Zelikow a “technology policy expert” who “support[s the government’s] position that linking of databases is necessary to track potential enemies operating inside the United States.”

Essentially, because users freely offer their personal data to internet companies, that data is not protected even though it seems as if it should be.

Finally, regardless of the constitutional status of PRISM and XKeyscore, the U.S. government continues to defend its right to metadata surveillance on the grounds of ensuring international security. In a January 20, 2014 speech to the nation, President Obama explicitly ties the country's status as a guardian of the world to its superior technological capabilities and argues that the government has always relied on surveillance systems during times of peril. He states, "In the Civil War, Union balloon reconnaissance tracked the size of Confederate armies by counting the number of campfires. In World War II, code-breakers gave us insights into Japanese war plans.... [I]n the early days of the Cold War, President Truman created the National Security Agency, or NSA, to give us insights into the Soviet bloc, and provide our leaders with information they needed to confront aggression and avert catastrophe" ("Speech on N.S.A. Phone Surveillance"). Obama begins by connecting post-9/11 surveillance to other historical events (the Civil War, World War II, the Cold War) when increased surveillance was both necessary and fruitful, and then goes on to suggest that, had such a surveillance program been in place prior to 9/11, the security community might have been able to prevent the attacks: "The program grew out of a desire to address a gap identified after 9/11.²⁸ One of the 9/11 hijackers . . . made a phone call from San Diego to a known al Qaeda safe-house in Yemen. NSA saw that call, but it could not see that the call was coming from an individual already in the United States. The telephone metadata

²⁸ Here Obama connects increased surveillance to *The 9/11 Report's* recommendation that the government create an integrated system of knowledge-sharing among government intelligence and law enforcement agencies (see Chapter Two).

program . . . was designed to map the communications of terrorists so we can see who they may be in contact with as quickly as possible” (“Speech”). Obama thus places 9/11 in the historical record and claims that record as justification for increased surveillance.

But more than the history of justified surveillance in the United States, Obama claims the nation’s values as clearly supporting the need for programs like PRISM. In a series of appeals to those values, Obama states, “[T]he United States has unique responsibilities when it comes to intelligence collection. Our capabilities help protect not only our nation, but our friends and our allies, as well”; “what’s really at stake is how we remain true to who we are in a world that is remaking itself at dizzying speed”; “It may seem sometimes that America is being held to a different standard. And I’ll admit the readiness of some to assume the worst motives by our government can be frustrating. No one expects China to have an open debate about their surveillance programs. . . . We are held to a different standard precisely because we have been at the forefront of defending personal privacy and human dignity” (“Speech”). In these statements, Obama essentially claims that mass surveillance makes the world safe for democracy: the United States, with its exceptional commitment to both safety and civil liberties, must carry out mass surveillance not just because it is necessary to stop terrorism but also because no other nation could possibly ensure both safety and civil liberty simultaneously. But most of all, Obama claims, as a technological superpower, only the United States could create a system that is both effective and fair: “As the nation that developed the Internet, the world expects us to ensure that the digital revolution works as a tool for individual empowerment, not government control. . . . Those values make us who we are. And because of the strength of our own democracy, we should not shy away from high

expectations.” Obama thus ends with a rhetorical call to action that attempts to convince Americans that mass surveillance is more than necessary; it is practically a birthright. Only the United States possesses the combination of technological might and moral fortitude necessary to keep the world safe in the post-9/11 era.

Science and 9/11 Literature

The above discussion provides the context one needs in order to understand the perceptions of science in American culture encountered in 9/11 fiction. The notion of the United States as a technological superpower is a national ideal dating back to the 19th century. Likewise, the close relationship between the defense industry and scientific research formed the foundation of the myth of America’s invulnerable defense. 9/11 directly challenged these ideals, which had already been seriously undermined during the latter half of the 20th century due to the technological failures of Vietnam, the loss of a defined enemy in Communism, and the challenges to the concept of absolute truth posed by postmodern theory. The government responded by increasing science funding and building a large-scale surveillance system; these moves contributed to an overarching cultural response designed to reinstate ideals of the nation’s technological supremacy and invulnerability to attack. In the chapters that follow, I investigate the ways in which texts that focus on 9/11 talk about science and technology, with a goal of determining how they variably participate in cultural myth-building work.

Many of the literary responses to 9/11 demonstrate a vein of exceptionalist thinking similar to those views expressed by cultural critics and political commentators. According to Laura Frost, whose “Still Life: 9/11’s Falling Bodies” appears in the first

collection of essays to address the literary response to September 11, much of the fiction “[emphasizes] redemption, courage, noble sacrifice, dignified human connection, and above all, heroism” (200). Likewise, the collection’s editors, Keniston and Quinn, find that “the initial experience of incommensurability generated a culture-wide need for explanatory narratives, not simply as a means for countering trauma, but as a means for refusing incommensurability, prompting attempts to place 9/11 into a historical framework” (3). While Keniston and Quinn find such explanatory narratives necessary, Frost questions the appropriateness of sustaining a narrative of exceptionalism that is at best no longer applicable and at worst detrimental to the nation’s ability to question and revise that narrative. However, Alex Houen locates the political efficacy of 9/11 novels precisely in their ability to imagine a radically different world where attacks need not become commonplace. He explains that, because “the sheer horror of the event seemed unreal” (“Novel Spaces” 419), it has become the task of fiction writers, “the experts at imagining the unimaginable, the masters of other worlds of possibility” (420), to tell the story of 9/11 back to an audience that was “there” but upon reflection does not quite know where “there” was. A tension thus exists between a need to register, understand, and re-imagine 9/11 in literature and the tendency to reiterate exceptionalist discourse that can accompany those narrative modes.

The subsequent chapters of this study specifically examine the ways in which several key texts interrogate the intersection of science and American exceptionalism. I contend that the effect of the attacks on the nation’s sense of its scientific superiority results in a body of literature that explores and thinks about the country’s role as a technological superpower. Not surprisingly, however, those works—*The 9/11 Report*,

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and Colson Whitehead's *The Colossus of New York*—implicitly address exceptionalist discourse. My argument as a whole is *not* that the entire body of 9/11 literature participates in intentional propaganda (or an unintentional lack of thinking-through) but rather that to engage science is necessarily to engage questions of the nation's (in)vulnerability as it relates to scientific and technological supremacy. Yet other 9/11 novels, including John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006), and Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), reinstate rather than revise the notion of America as superpower. A brief exploration of these three novels demonstrates this point as well as offers a fuller context in which to consider the fictional works I discuss in Chapters Three and Four.

John Updike's *Terrorist* engages the discourse of exceptionalism via an assertion of American paternalism. Perhaps the clearest example of a “hero story,” it critiques the intersection of postmodern cultural relativism and the dissolution of the American nuclear family by positing a need for father figures, whether personal or national. Updike's version of post-9/11 America lacks both fathers and the answers those fathers are supposed to provide, leading young men like Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy to seek them out in fundamentalist imams. The imam, however, must compete with the *de facto* father figures provided by the American educational system. Jack Levy, Ahmad's school guidance counselor, “interviews children who seem to have no flesh-and-blood parents—whose instructions from the world are entirely imparted by electronic ghosts signaling across a crowded room, or rapping through black foam earplugs...” (34). One of those students whom he attempts to “parent” is Ahmad, who identifies with his absent Egyptian

father and considers his Irish American mother “trashy and immoral” (35). Under the imam’s influence, Ahmad has abandoned the college track of classes, which, he says, ““exposed me to corrupting influences—bad philosophy and bad literature. Western culture is Godless”” (38). Levy suggests that Ahmad should, ““in a diverse and tolerant society like this one...confront a variety of viewpoints”” (39), but Ahmad resists this idea, stating instead what his imam has taught him: ““such a relativistic approach trivializes religion, implying that it doesn’t much matter. You believe this, I believe that, we all get along—that’s the American way”” (39). Asked what the imam thinks of this supposed American view of religion, Ahmad responds that he hates it. This conversation leads Levy to conclude, “Ahmad in his fatherless years with his blithely faithless mother has grown accustomed to being God’s sole custodian, the one to whom God is an invisible but palpable companion” (39). Ahmad has replaced his absent father with a very present God, thus eschewing the apparent immoral relativism of Western culture and its godless people and institutions.

The imam who chooses Ahmad as a follower is not, however, an innocent spiritual leader but part of a terrorist group intent on attacking New York City. In counseling Ahmad to leave the college track for the vocational track, he has in fact been training him for jihad, coaching him to be the driver of a truck bomb into the Lincoln Tunnel. Ahmad willingly accepts his role, seeing in his self-sacrifice “the self-release of turning aside and addressing a self not his own but that of Another, a Being as close as the vein of his neck” (252). His imam may be manipulative (237), but the God the imam gives him, and the route he provides to that God, is an experience of “the real” Ahmad desires. Updike thus pinpoints the child’s need for guidance and stability as the source of

his turn to fundamentalism. Furthermore, the nation is in part responsible for its own destruction, not because of a global failure to pursue just foreign relations or economic policies but because of a local failure to nurture and support the nuclear family. As Levy points out, “kids like Ahmad need to have something they don’t get from society any more. Society doesn’t let them be innocent any more. The crazy Arabs are right—hedonism, nihilism, that’s all we offer. [...] No one accepts responsibility, so the kids, some of them, take it on” (205-6). Updike thus implicitly blames the war between the West and Islam on Western immorality and on the inability of the American family to impart traditional values to its children.

Updike’s viewpoint is problematic because it assumes the existence of a “better America” that once existed and is now lost. Yet this assumption is necessary if he is to provide an explanation for the challenge of Muslim extremism. What makes *Terrorist* a hero story is the fact that Ahmad does not go through with the bombing of the tunnel precisely because of the intervention of a father figure. In the action-movie-like ending sequence of the novel, Levy accompanies Ahmad on his trip from Northern New Jersey to the city, and, while he does not explicitly prevent Ahmad from carrying out the attack, he facilitates Ahmad’s questioning of his mission. Levy admits that he has had a relationship with Ahmad’s mother and that he has seen little reason to live after they broke off their relationship. As a result, Ahmad is torn between a death that will bring him to God, a god he considers his only father (“He will greet you as His son” [305]), and helping Levy die a death that he seems to desire. Levy accomplishes a re-Americanizing of Ahmad by forcing him to rethink his faith and his commitment to jihad. The same passages of the Quran that persuaded Ahmad to take part in the bombing now tell him

something quite different: “He does not want us to desecrate His creation by willing death. He wills life” (306). The text that in the hands of the imam provided stability and clear answers now demands questioning and qualification. For Ahmad, this is not a positive change. In the last line of the novel he thinks, “These devils...have taken away my God” (310). Updike thus suggests that the task of the contemporary American father is to gently (or not so gently) guide children into the reality of relativism and loss.

More importantly, Updike also seems to suggest that events like 9/11 are preventable with the right kind of intervention. In the hours leading up to his planned attack, Ahmad’s “last” acts are reminiscent of the painstaking account of everything the 9/11 hijackers did in the hours leading up to the attacks.²⁹ Updike provides a detailed timeline for Ahmad: “At seven-fifteen he closes the door behind him, leaving behind in the safe room the Qur’an and the cleanliness instructions for another shahid but taking his gym bag, packed with his soiled underpants, socks, and white shirt. [...] The sky is not crystal clear but damp and gray” (276). However, because Levy intervenes, these details become meaningless—Ahmad does not carry out his plan. For Updike, then, American cultural relativism is inevitable but survivable with paternal guidance and, in fact, can be an asset to the nation’s survival when wielded against fundamentalism. American invulnerability thus relies on the presence and guidance of ever-present father figures.

While *Terrorist* suggests that 9/11 does not have to happen again, Claire Messud’s *The Emperor’s Children* embraces the event as an opportunity for a uniquely American form of personal reinvention. *Emperor’s Children* is only tangentially a 9/11

²⁹ There is an almost obsessive attention to these “last minutes” details in modern American massacres. Accounts of Columbine, 9/11, the Ft. Hood attack, and most recently the Sandy Hook shooting devote a lot of time to detailing last meals, what was left behind in apartments, and so forth, seemingly in an attempt to answer “why?” by examining (in a detective-like fashion) the evidence that was left behind.

novel; it focuses on New York media culture before 9/11 and considers the attack insofar as it affects the publishing world. However, one character, Bootie, uses the attack as a means of slipping from the confines of his old persona. Like so many other 9/11 characters, Bootie is a boy in search of a father, and he finds that father in his Uncle Murray, a famous literary critic. Bootie has an aimless and undefined desire “to do something important” (66), which manifests in the writing of a “cultural exposé” (333) of Murray. As a result, his family disowns him and he disappears into the anonymity of the city. When the attacks occur, he is supposed to be at work near the Trade Center, but because he is late for work he is saved: “They said maybe tens of thousands. People in the towers, on the planes, and some, too, in the crowds, in the streets down below and nearby, where he ought to have been, had destiny not stayed him. But for anyone who went looking...it would be as if he had been there, in the lee of the towers, vanished, pulverized” (438). For Bootie, the attacks are “the precious opportunity to be again, not to be as he had been” (438). He determines that he had been prevented from attaining artistic success because he had been trapped by others’ expectations of him: “He had never been known rightly—how could he be, in the carapace of his ill-fitting name” (437-438). 9/11 thus allows him “To be absolutely unrelated. Without context. To be truly and in every way self-reliant. At last” (437-8). While Updike’s Ahmad seeks the guidance of a father figure, Messud’s Bootie requires the opposite, the freedom from being over-determined by such a figure.

While 9/11 is for Updike a tragic example of the need for stronger American guidance in the world, Messud places the attacks on a continuum of artistic expression. This is not to say that she “approves of” the attacks, but she does liken Bootie’s desire for

artistic reinvention and relevance to the hijackers' similar desire "to do something important." In the ending sequence of the novel, Bootie vacates another of his anonymous motel rooms because a friend has discovered that he is still alive, and he wants to disappear again before his family finds him. Like Ahmad, he goes through a series of rituals before his departure: "When he got back to his room, he started to pack his few things.... He thought of taking a bath, one last time in the plastic tub of which he grew fond; but there wasn't time. [...] He would remember the smell of the air, here.... He would carry its message with him, along with all the others" (479). But, unlike Ahmad, whose attempt to find himself in Islam leads him to lose that construction of self because of Levy's intervention, Bootie has ensured that any such intervention is impossible: "This person in motion was who he was becoming: it was something, too: a man, someday, with qualities. Ulrich New. ...take them by surprise. Yes. He would" (479). To "take them by surprise" is, of course, what the hijackers did on 9/11, and Bootie's quest to reinvent himself will, he hopes, lead to a similarly world-changing event. Messud thus implicitly critiques American paternalism by showing how it contributes to one's desire to throw off that "father" in favor of self-determination and reinvention. However, she nonetheless engages in the discourse of exceptionalism precisely through her reworking of the significance of 9/11. By invoking Emerson in both Bootie's quest for self-reliance and his concept of "the genius," Messud reads the attacks as an opportunity for the reinvention of the American identity. While Updike suggests a way to prevent further attacks, Messud pinpoints a way that Americans can rewrite or repurpose their meaning. Messud defines a problem—paternalism—that Updike seeks to solve through the very same paternalism. Yet even Messud remains tied to exceptionalist

thinking by making analogous the figure of the terrorist and that of the artist. She invokes American constructions of individualism and self-reliance in order to neutralize the threat of terrorism by reading the terrorist into an existing lineage of rule-breaking, world-changing American renegades. In both cases, the endings of the novels suggest that the United States will overcome its challengers, either by bringing them back into the fold or by surpassing their attempts to change the nation through embracing and defining change on its own terms.

By suggesting that the senseless violence of the attacks, and the accompanying meaninglessness of the loss of individual lives, can find retroactive purpose in a positive result, Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* proves the clearest example of exceptionalist discourse of the three novels discussed here. *Disorder* examines the lead-up to the Iraq War through the frame of familial discord. Both Joyce and Marshall Harriman should have been, but were not, killed in the attacks. Joyce is scheduled to take Flight 93 to San Francisco, but a failed business deal causes her to change her plans. Meanwhile, Marshall is late for work because he must drop off his children at school in Joyce's absence, resulting in his being caught in the lobby of the Trade Center instead of in his office. Taking this provisional moment as its starting point, *Disorder* works to make sense of the attacks by reading them as the difficult beginning of a story that ends with the creation of a redemptive future (i.e. the establishment of democracy in the Middle East).

Disorder represents the immediate public response to the attacks, portraying 9/11 as a terrible awakening for those who perceived the United States as a blameless friend of nations. After an anthrax scare forces her to flee her office building, Joyce thinks, "If this

time the anthrax wasn't real, then why not the next? She resented her former belief that their lives in America had been secure. . . . All over the planet people wanted to kill Americans" (32). Appropriately or not, Joyce's perception undergoes a complete reversal, from seeing enemies nowhere to fearing them everywhere. Like Joyce, Marshall thinks of the war constantly: "...he was keenly aware that he was living in October 2001, under a wartime regime, traversing a battlefield terrain, in a city that bore the standard of one civilization under attack by another" (46-47). Just as Joyce and Marshall experience the breakdown of exceptionalist narratives, they likewise witness the dissolution of hero stories. As Marshall flees the lobby he stops to help another man, Lloyd, but Lloyd is killed by falling debris. Marshall has difficulty coming to terms with his role in the man's death and instead fixates on the moment he meets Lloyd, trying to justify his role in a chronology where "the absence of the man from his future was like an enormous hole in the sky" (18). Marshall initially imagines himself into the hero story, "[glimpsing] a vision of the man he could yet be" (15). But with Lloyd's death, Marshall can no longer trust in a narrative of instincts and higher forces that once brought order to his universe.

Instead of allowing the novel to dwell in a state of broken narratives, however, *Disorder* does the work that Alex Houen calls for in "Novel Spaces and Taking Place(s) in the Wake of September 11th" when he states that the novel should "allow other potentials of experience to take place through writers and readers" (436). For Kalfus, that potential space is a novelized version of the aftermath of the attacks in which the various, nonsensical pieces of the tragedy can be woven into a sensible, necessary, and redemptive narrative. Throughout the novel, Kalfus references Donald Rumsfeld's

“unknown unknowns” speech in order to demonstrate the challenge Americans face when trying to make sense of 9/11. Explaining to Joyce the difficulty of putting to use the volumes of intelligence data gathered after the attacks, an FBI agent states, ““We have supercomputers crunching data right now, trying to get these pieces of evidence into alignment. [...] No one in the government has the ability to look at this mess in its entirety and make sense of it”” (137-38). In short, the government cannot create a coherent story, a “before, during, and after” of the attacks, from all of their data.³⁰ Likewise, those who experienced the event cannot make sense of what they know. Kalfus uses the Harriman children, Victor and Viola, to talk about the child-like way of reasoning and misunderstanding to which many were reduced by the attacks. The younger child, Victor, is completely incapable of making meaning out of observation. Instead, “Victor’s world was composed of entirely random elements, and any connections they made were ephemeral and arbitrary” (140). Victor represents an immediate, uncomprehending reaction to the attacks—the data gathered but not understood—while Viola, the Harrimans’ four-year-old daughter, represents a more mature yet still imperfect logical approach. Kalfus portrays Viola’s awakening to reason as she attempts to make sense of her parents and uses this awakening to imagine how those who experienced the attacks might similarly begin to reason their way through what they witnessed.

A domestic scene in which Victor breaks a vase becomes a metaphor for the Trade Center collapse and allows Kalfus to represent the American attempt to understand it. Viola studies Victor as he slowly apprehends his “weapons,” a tin plane and a rubber band: “He found other toys and bounced them against the rubber band.... It was only a

³⁰ Interestingly, the XKeyscore project was designed to do exactly this work of “crunching” a mess of data in order to create a coherent story from it.

matter of time before he launched one. She observed as his babyish mind labored to grasp the rubber band's operating principles" (141). Here Kalfus shows the U.S.'s mistaken infantilization of terrorists and, in so doing, helps to explain how the threat of Al Qaeda was overlooked. Viola later watches as Victor masters his tools and makes his attack: "The plane swiftly gained altitude as it crossed the living room. It flew steadily, without tumbling. [...] The flight ended, bull's-eye, in the princess vase's mid-section. When the toy piece struck, the glass changed color top to bottom...and the vase iridesced before it crashed and returned to its original elements.... There had been disorder in her analysis of what Victor was going to do, order in the vase's final fluent form, disorder in its dissolution, and a return to order in her comprehension of what had happened" (141). In this scene, which neatly mimics the surveillance community's process of understanding the attacks after the fact,³¹ Kalfus demonstrates the witness's desire to understand events in terms of their obvious causes and effect. Indeed, Viola has all of the evidence she needs to know what will happen long before Victor breaks the vase, but she must process disorder into order via reflection and narrativization. When her father asks her how she seems to know so much about the world in which she lives, Viola responds, "'It took awhile...but I figured it out. You have to pay attention'" (172). According to Kalfus, September 11th is wholly comprehensible; one need only "pay attention" and piece together the facts. Thus, while exceptionalist narratives and hero stories clearly fail in the immediate aftermath of September 11th, Kalfus demonstrates through this domestic scene that those narratives do not completely or permanently lose their explanatory power.

³¹ See Chapter Two's discussion of *The 9/11 Report* for a discussion of the intelligence community's "disorder" in its analysis of data prior to the attacks followed by the "order" to which it brings that evidence after the attacks have occurred.

For his part, Kalfus does the work of bringing the world back to order by imagining a redemptive end to the Iraq War. He writes the war's end as a series of facts: "Meanwhile the Iraq war had been won with unprecedented speed and dexterity. A light coalition presence had swiftly established order around the country. [...] Saddam's location was given up by his Tikrit cousins and he was run down by a unit of the Free Iraqi Forces in an orchard..." (229). Like Viola's list of the facts she knows about her parents (127), the facts of the war are similarly laid bare. Significantly, the war's triumphant end stems from a seemingly insignificant difference between the novel space and reality: Saddam is captured and killed by Iraqi rather than American forces. Though the Americans attempt to take over, "rejoicing Iraqis who converged on the site refused. It was one of the Iraqis' few acts of defiance" (229-30). However, as Kalfus has demonstrated earlier, those facts that at first seem meaningless or insignificant (like Victor, the toy plane, and the vase) simply have not yet been brought to order and meaning.

Kalfus takes Houen's call for the creation of a new world in the novel quite seriously, moving forward from the establishment of a free Iraqi state to the spread of democracy throughout the Middle East. Restrictive regimes in Syria and Iraq topple. Israel and Palestine reach a peace agreement. And finally, "Osama bin Laden was found huddled on a filthy rug in a cave" (234), a detail that references the image of Saddam being pulled from an underground hiding spot in Iraq. With bin Laden's capture, Kalfus is finally able to reverse the events of September 11th and bring the story to an end that mirrors its beginning:

Marshall and his colleagues rushed to the windows, crying gleefully. Across the way in other offices people cheered and raised their arms too. Shouts rose from the street ten stories below [...] Abandoning their briefcases, his colleagues left the office in a hurry. Marshall followed them out, and once they encountered congestion in the elevator lobby, they went down the stairs...everyone patient while they congratulated each other.... This time they headed downtown, this time with their shoes on their feet. (234-35)

The celebration runs like a filmic reversal of the evacuation: shoes are returned to feet, shouts rise up from the ground, and briefcases are dropped instead of picked up. Though unimaginable given what readers now know of the Iraq War's aftermath, Kalfus's construction of bin Laden's capture constitutes an experience of imaginative closure. Eventually the crowd reaches Ground Zero, where "the vastness of the emptiness of the hole in the city was inflamed with human noise and aspiration" (237). The skyline is thus restored.³² Hussein's death puts in motion a string of events that replaces what was lost on September 11th with a new set of possibilities. Each event flows logically from the next, thus moving the specific details of the capture from the realm of the provisional to the realm of the logical, orderly, and meaningful.

The ending of *Disorder* clearly represents the strongest endorsement of exceptionalism among the novels discussed here. By imagining a world in which the Iraq

³² A similar desire to fill the empty sky is evident in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*. The novel ends with the protagonist's memory of the Towers at sunset: "a world concentrated most glamorously of all, it goes almost without saying, in the lilac acres of two amazingly high towers going up above all others, on one of which, as the boat drew us nearer, the sun began to make a brilliant yellow mess. ...I can state that I wasn't the only one of us to make out and accept an extraordinary promise in what we saw—the tall approaching cape, a people risen in light" (255-56).

War leads to the spread of democracy throughout the Middle East, *Disorder* participates in a form of cultural imperialism that assumes not just that the United States' form of rule is right but also that the Middle East impatiently awaits its chance to be Westernized.³³ Admittedly, Kalfus staves off stronger charges of an imperialist mindset by asserting that the key to the spread of democracy is self-direction and self-rule. Nevertheless, the sides of right and wrong are as clear as the story's logic, and a democratic world is clearly on the side of right. Nor does Kalfus deny that the novel's ending is patriotic. As Marshall joins the crowds, he sings patriotic songs and "felt a huge emotion surging within him: it was relief at bin Laden's capture, of course, but also sudden love for his country, at that moment an honest, unalloyed, uncompromised white-hot passion" (236). Again, though the capture of bin Laden ultimately results from Iraqi self-rule, the United States remains both creator and beneficiary of such a shift. Quoting Ulrich Baer, Houen writes, "Novels in particular, in their efforts to construct fully realized alternative universes, seemed navigable and inhabitable the way downtown was not . . . I admit it, I read literature as an escape: even novels about catastrophes seemed to provide coherence that was missing from my life" (421). *Disorder* exemplifies just that experience of possibility and coherence found only in a novel, as it aims not just to create a possible world but also to explain how such worlds are logically produced. It also provides an escape from the reality of the Iraq War, a war that by 2006 was in the midst of a seemingly unending occupation.

Updike, Messud, and Kalfus demonstrate significant investment in both

³³ While the "wave of revolution" that Kalfus imagines is characteristic of the revolutions that have recently taken place, the outcomes have been (or will be, in the next few years) quite different. Pro-Western democracies in the style of the United States are unlikely to be created, and the change of government in Egypt, for example, is more likely to destabilize tenuous peace agreements in the Middle East.

exceptionalist discourse and the ability of traditional narrative forms to contain and explain the September 11th attacks. Kalfus in particular considers the attacks as an imminently solvable knowledge problem. His characters do not suffer from either an overabundance of knowledge or an insufficiency of narrative; rather, they merely require the passage of time to make sense of the event, a passage that allows both for reflection and for the attacks to reach their logical and meaningful conclusion. In contrast, the chapters that follow examine texts that do not hurry to reestablish traditional hero stories and exceptionalist narratives. Rather, they carefully consider September 11th as a knowledge problem, as an event whose witnesses simultaneously see too much and understand too little. In Chapter Two, I consider *The 9/11 Report* as a document that attempts to explain the lead-up to the attacks and their aftermath while asserting that the event can never be completely known or explained. Chapters Three and Four return to a consideration of fiction. Together, Foer and Whitehead create fictional characters who navigate the very real landscapes of post-9/11 New York City, helping readers understand, or at least confront, what happened to them on September 11th. At the center of both of these fictional texts sit questions of knowledge: Oskar ceaselessly works to learn his father's fate, while Whitehead's narrators ground their definition of "New York" in what they know about the city and what the city knows about them. The epistemic questions surrounding September 11th—what should the nation have known about the attacks before they happened, and what must the government learn to preempt the next attack?—likewise motivate the protagonists in Foer and Whitehead's texts as both consider the way that the event destabilizes one's knowledge of self, city, and nation.

Chapter Two

Truths, Self-Evident: Inventing Authenticity and Generating Knowledge in *The 9/11 Report* (2004, 2006)

The exceptionalist viewpoint asserts that the United States enjoys a privileged status derived from its historical origins, democratic government, and cultural achievements. In the context of the September 11th attacks, exceptionalism translates as a belief that the United States was not likely to face attacks on its own soil and, moreover, that any attack would be thwarted by the nation's superior military and scientific powers.³⁴ This discourse also extends to the position technology assumes in American culture, meaning that the exceptionalist United States creates singular technologies and actively chooses to employ them rightly and responsibly. And finally, exceptionalism controls both the nation's understanding of its standing in the world and the scientific knowledge that makes it superior. The September 11th attacks undermined all aspects of exceptionalist discourse, from the unlikelihood of the attack itself to the sense that the attacks ought to have been knowable, containable, and preventable.

While nothing could render the attacks containable or preventable after they had occurred, the nation still wanted to make them knowable. This desire led to the creation of the most elaborately researched and documented work of nonfiction produced about the event: *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Officially called The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, the more-popularly known 9/11 Commission was tasked with "provid[ing] the fullest possible account of the events surrounding 9/11 and to identify lessons learned" (*The 9/11 Commission Report* xvi). The ten-member Commission, headed by Thomas Kean and staffed by 81 lawyers, administrators,

³⁴ See Chapter One for a fuller discussion of American exceptionalism.

researchers, and editors, was ordered by Congress “to investigate ‘facts and circumstances relating to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001,’ including those relating to intelligence agencies, law enforcement agencies, diplomacy, immigration issues and border control,” and so on (xv). Considered another way, the Commission was tasked with writing a history encompassing not just the events of the day but the decades-long play of politics between the United States and the Middle East, a history that would move past the day’s events to answer the question, “How did this happen...?” (xv). From the first page of the Preface through the 567-page report, the Commission’s authors connect their own truth claim to the bare statistics of their research: “2.5 million pages of documents and [interviews of] more than 1,200 individuals in ten countries . . . 19 days of hearings and . . . public testimony from 160 witnesses” (xv). Yet equally significant to these statistics is the Commission’s almost immediate acknowledgement of the likelihood of partial failure. At the end of the Preface they write, “We want to note what we have done, and not done. We have endeavored to provide the most complete account we can of the events of September 11, what happened and why. This final report is only a summary . . . citing only a fraction of the sources we have consulted. [W]e are conscious of our limits. We have not interviewed every knowledgeable person or found every relevant piece of paper” (xvii). A fraction, limits, data lost or not yet discovered: here the Commission expresses a deep desire to be able to say “I don’t know how I could have tried harder” (Foer 160)³⁵ alongside a reluctance to consider the search complete. Instead,

³⁵ In Chapter Three I discuss Oskar Schell’s search for information about his father’s death on September 11th in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Like the Commission, Oskar acknowledges from the outset that his search may not be fruitful; thus he considers the effort of the search itself as meaningful and necessary as whatever answers he might find.

they cast *The 9/11 Report* not as a closed case but as an open book, not an understanding of the event but “a foundation for a better understanding” (xvii).

The following discussion of *The 9/11 Report* considers the Commission’s attempt to create a story of September 11th that, while clearly factual, depends not on data alone but on narrative strategies to establish textual authority. Specifically, the Commission casts itself in the role of storyteller of September 11th, shifting *The 9/11 Report* from the genre of traditional government document to that of a work of narrative nonfiction influenced by contemporary understandings of historiography. As Hayden White notes in “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” “The historian shares with his audience general notions of the forms that significant human situations must take.... In the process of studying a given complex of events, he begins to perceive the possible story form that such events may figure. In his narrative account of how this set of events took on the shape which he perceives to inhere within it, he emplots his account as a story of a particular kind” (86). The 9/11 Commission clearly understands that its task is not merely to chronicle the events of 9/11 but also to organize those events into a meaningful narrative.³⁶ Therefore they emplot 9/11 as a contemporary thriller, using formal techniques such as foreshadowing and interwoven narratives to build suspense in a story the end of which every single reader already knows. While a variety of genres *could* provide the framework necessary to narrate the event, the thriller creates a sense of anticipation that allows readers to experience the many instances of lapsed or lost

³⁶ White distinguishes between “facts” and “events,” writing, “Events happen or occur; facts are constituted by the subsumption of events under a description, which is to say, by acts of predication” (“Historiography and Historiophoty” 1196). My use of the terms “facts” and events” in this chapter aligns with White’s distinction.

knowledge that led to the attacks.³⁷ The first half of this chapter begins with an examination of the critical reception of *The 9/11 Report* and asserts that its positive reception stems from its status as a work of narrative nonfiction. The Commission locates its authority not in facts themselves but rather in an ability to shape facts into story. In their creation of a 9/11 thriller, the Commission creates a text that has been widely received as both good (as a work of narrative nonfiction) and trustworthy (as a report).

In response to this critical reception, the second half of this chapter challenges *The 9/11 Report's* claim to a trustworthy narrative voice by reading the text against *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*, published in 2006 by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón. Perhaps unexpectedly, the engagement of the storytelling mode results in a report that seems to its audience to be more, not less, trustworthy. Rather than casting the report as a scientific, objective chronicle, the Commission acknowledges the limits and failures of its own authorship, resulting in the creation of an authentic, if admittedly limited, authorial voice. Lurking beneath the story, however, lay certain assumptions that go uninterrogated precisely because they belong to the realm of story. As White claims, “[I]t may be observed that if historians were to recognize the fictive element in their narratives . . . this recognition would serve as a potent antidote to the tendency of historians to become captive of ideological preconceptions which they do not recognize as such but honor as the ‘correct’ perception of ‘the way things really are’” (“Historical Text” 99). However, while the Commission and its readers embrace *The 9/11 Report* in its status as a narrative, they stop short of interrogating the exceptionalist discourse driving that narrative. Once translated into a graphic adaptation (which Colón and Jacobson are careful to call “comics journalism” rather than a graphic novel or a comic book), *The 9/11 Report*

³⁷ See also Chapter Three’s discussion of genre choice in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.

demonstrates qualities of a classic superhero comic: good guys battle bad guys while the fate of the world hangs in the balance. In the process of adaptation from report to comic, the Commission's ideological underpinnings rise to the surface: the attacks are unexpected because any attack against the United States is unimaginable; 9/11 kicks off a battle between good (Americans) and evil (Arabs—not Afghans or Saudis, but Arabs); and heroes (men—firefighters, police officers) always endeavor to save lives (women's lives in particular) even at the risk of their own deaths. Most relevant to the purposes of this study, however, are the graphic adaptation's depictions of technology. As discussed in Chapter One, the nation's invulnerability to attack relies on military and technological supremacy. Specifically, the exceptional nation requires the all-encompassing knowledge (of its own and the world's citizens) made available by surveillance technologies. While the adaptation's text retains the original report's wording, which highlights the failures of the nation's tech-based defense and knowledge-gathering systems, the adaptation nevertheless constructs a powerful version of the national defense against images of primitive technologies employed by al Qaeda. In this way, *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* supports and even supersedes the *9/11 Report*'s assumptions regarding the nation's technological supremacy. That security should be based on technological advancements remains an untested assumption of exceptionalist discourse; both the textual and graphic reports question not the assumption itself but merely how that technology might be better implemented. *The 9/11 Report* thus pinpoints information-gathering systems—in the form of both human- and machine-based surveillance—as a means of preventing future attacks.

Finally, the very creation of a graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Report* indicates that knowledge of the event remains containable. Colón and Jacobson state, in various interviews about their work, their desire to make the textual report accessible to audiences that would otherwise not read it. Despite reviewers' insistence on the inherent readability of the *Report*, Colón claims that the names, places, and descriptions were difficult for him to follow. He and Jacobson therefore created the comic because "[they are] in the business of clarification" ("The Sept. 11 Commission Report as Graphic Novel"). I end this chapter with a consideration of the accessibility of knowledge regarding 9/11. That Colón and Jacobson endeavor to create a report accessible to all (comics include, by default, marginalized groups such as nonreaders) partly speaks to a democratic ideal regarding the availability, transparency, and dissemination of information about the nation, its shortcomings, and its goals. But, at the same time, the report stands as a triumph of knowability, an assertion of the nation's capability to know and see all and, indeed, in its attempt to narrativize the roots of jihad, to speak for all.

Critical Reception of *The 9/11 Report* (text, 2004)

When considering the challenge of creating a demonstrably factual, well-received account of the events of 9/11, it is helpful to examine the "Satan's Face" urban legend as evidence of the difficulty of making a rational argument during an irrational time. Before the "mastermind" of Osama bin Laden became a common character in the media, viewers of the attack thought they saw his presumed devilish analog in the smoke of the South Tower. "Satan's Face" was captured in a photograph taken by Mark D. Phillips, first published by the Associated Press and then quickly circulated via email (specifically the

“chain letter” of the earlier Internet age, which predates but is a precursor to the viral-video era). According to columnist Mark Jacobson, “the ‘devil face’ that many saw in the billowing smoke within seconds after Flight 175 smashed into the South Tower was almost certainly not Photoshopped. It is there, fully visible in the AP photo . . . as well as on the CNN feed archived on YouTube, hovering below the point of impact, around the 70th floor” (“Satan’s Face”). Jacobson points out that one needs to have a very specific “Middle Ages” image of Lucifer in mind when viewing the smoke and, further, that its appearance was debunked as a coincidence in a 2002 University of Texas study.³⁸

Nevertheless, the face remains a part of the American imaginary, visual testimony to the immediate desire to read the attacks as a plotline in which an innocent nation is subject to a brutal attack by a foe no less powerful than Satan himself. Despite scientific evidence to the contrary, one can see in the smoke what one wishes to see, and what the American public seemed to wish to see was a mythic battle of epic proportions: Good and Evil, God and Satan, gone to war for the hearts and minds of the City on the Hill.

Against such stories of the attacks already in circulation, the authors³⁹ of *The 9/11 Report* work to construct a narrative that would satisfy the public’s need for answers to the “how” and “why” questions that drive the immediate impulse to concoct urban

³⁸ Susan Martinez-Conde writes, “One year later computer scientists Vladik Kreinovich and Dima Iourinski of the University of Texas at El Paso published a geometric analysis of the face in the photograph, also seen in a different image from CNN. The analysis showed that perturbations in the smoke can consist of horizontal lines (such as the “eyes” and “mouth”) and vertical lines (such as the “nose”) overlaid on a conic surface (the “head”). The scientists concluded that both the background shape (the cone) and the features on the background (horizontal and vertical lines) are naturally explained by the physics and geometry of smoke plumes emanating from fire” (“Illusion of the Week: Satan in the Smoke”)

³⁹ The report has no single author. As critic Thomas Crampton notes in “If 9/11 Report Wins Award, Will 90 Authors Rise?”, “[R]epresentatives of the commission are more willing to discuss how the writing was done than who actually did it.” Crampton cites the necessity for a bipartisan report that would paint neither the Clinton nor the Bush administrations in overwhelmingly positive or negative lights for the report’s lack of a single author. In place of such a figurehead, Crampton reports that “the closest anyone came to being the principal author was Philip D. Zelikow.” Notably, both Zelikow and Ernest R. May, the report’s other “author surrogate” (Zelikow’s term), are history professors at the University of Virginia and Harvard, respectively.

legends. As White explains, "the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story" drives "the apparently universal need not only to narrate but to give to events an aspect of narrativity" ("Value of Narrativity" 8). In other words, the public desires more than the facts; they want an explanatory narrative. As Thomas Crampton discusses in his coverage of the report's nomination for a National Book Award in the category of nonfiction, "Even before the book was chosen this month as a nonfiction finalist in the competition, it had inspired critical praise for a writing style that is rare in a government report" ("If 9/11 Report Wins Award"). Thomas Kean, the chairperson of the Commission, explains that the Commission wanted to do more than create a best-selling "souvenir"-style report that would go unread on Americans' shelves. Their goal, according to Crampton, was to create a text that would "'grip like something that people would not only buy, they would read.'" Likewise, the *Report's* co-historian, Ernest May, describes discussions of the report's eventual form in ways that are reminiscent of the historiographic distinction between the annal, the chronicle, and the history⁴⁰: "'Historians kept insisting on chronology, the lawyers wanted to present evidence and argument, while the intelligence officials just love getting into details on how they acquired information. . . . The commissioners kept the broad view and repeatedly reminded us to make it a story" (qtd. in Crampton). Eschewing the cataloguing mode of the annal suggested by the intelligence officials, or the slightly more crafted chronicle favored by historians, the commission heads advocated for a gripping tale, a position ultimately accepted by May and Zelikow.

⁴⁰ For a fuller discussion of the annal/chronicle/history relationship, see Hayden White's "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (1980): 5-27. Print.

A survey of literary reviews from the months following the report's release reveals that it has enjoyed an overwhelmingly positive critical reception precisely because it makes for good reading. According to Crampton, "Sales in excess of one million copies of the first authorized version kept the book at No. 1 for 11 weeks on The New York Times best-seller list" ("If 9/11 Report Wins Award"). Aligning the report with the genre of the trauma memoir or confessional, critic Philip Kennicott praises its style, writing, "The report's sentences are lean and simple.... The tone is restrained. A carefully chosen adjective here or there gives color, but there is nothing baroque" ("A Novel Approach"). Kennicott also notes that, in contrast to the "dry details" of a typical government publication, the report's weaving of fact into story "capture[s] a mood, a sense of calm vulnerability." The confessional voice, which Kennicott claims is now "cliché" when it appears in contemporary memoir, nevertheless turns the government document into a book that is "compulsively readable" and "more interesting than [readers] had expected." Critic David Ignatius calls the report "something of a literary phenomenon": "The strength of the report is precisely in its narrative power; by telling all the little stories, it reveals the big story in a different way. We see the bland evil of the plotters, the Hamlet-like indecision of government officials" ("The Book on Terror"). While readability is not always the most prized quality in literary fiction—one need only consider David Foster Wallace, reigning champion of the paratextual footnote, to recognize the accolades awarded to difficulty—the Commission and its critics consider both the report's inherent readability and its acquisition of a large readership as signs that the nation desired a story, not just a chronicle, of September 11th.

Alongside the report's literary critics, Craig A. Warren offers the only in-depth academic treatment of *The 9/11 Report* in "‘It reads like a novel’: The ‘9/11 Commission Report’ and the American Reading Public." According to Warren, the report's sales success (he cites a first-run printing of 600,000 copies [536]) demonstrates "the public's hunger for literature as a means of shaping national identity" (534). Warren's reading of the report's reception considers what that reception reveals about highbrow and lowbrow literary culture. He claims that "most readers associated the novel genre with narrative thrills and intrigue rather than with artistic achievement" (546), suggesting that Americans want to read *The 9/11 Report*, but they want that reading simplified through textual reliance on the conventions of genre fiction. Indeed, Warren quotes a member of the Commission, Timothy J. Roemer, who claims that the report could be "‘summer reading for adults the way Harry Potter is for kids’" (536). Summer reading acts as code for a "beach read," the easy engagement with a novel that holds one's attention without a great deal of effort.⁴¹ For Warren, the most important aspect of the report's "novelization" is not that it reads as genre fiction but that it defies genre classification. He claims that "the commissioners' language liberated the 9/11 Commission Report from one set of literary expectations and hence made it available to complex and competing readings" (548). This generic "liberation" results in a text "[that is] suddenly and simultaneously a trauma memoir, mystery novel, espionage thriller, confessional, legal brief, episodic history, cautionary tale, and work of fantasy" (549). In short, readers bring to the report their desires for a certain kind of story and find it written there.

Despite the report's migration from government document to genre fiction and its

⁴¹ The report's subject matter alone problematizes Roemer's "summer reading" classification. The report, unlike the genres it mimics, is a fact-based representation of a major (and for some, traumatic) national event.

additional slippage among thriller, memoir, and the many other genres Warren cites, critics and readers generally do not consider genre status a sign of weakness. That is, the report does not become less trustworthy via the process of narrativization. Warren claims that the report maintains authority because the public seeks out and is willing to place its trust in a strong government following the attacks: “As the state's most prominent and thorough investigation of 9/11, the Report . . . represented the voice of a renewed federal government, once again empowered . . . to occupy a central place within the lives of the American people. And because the independent commission stood apart from any particular administration or political ideology, the Report appeared all the more attractive to a public seeking comfort and guidance from its traditional source of protection - a strong and trustworthy national power” (544). Separate from and almost without regard for content and form, Warren argues, the report acquires textual authority directly from the government that created it, from the act of Congress that initiates the report to the Commission that researches it and documents it. In this reading, the people want answers, the government provides those answers, and the people are satisfied.

Yet Warren’s location of textual authority in the government that produces the text does not account for the very tentativeness of the report’s authorial voice, a tentativeness on which the above reading of genre slippage relies. The Commission creates a writerly report, not a readerly one, an invitation to make meaning of the text rather than a handing-down of the facts that explain the hows and whys of the attacks. In this way, textual authority resides in both the text and the reader, a rhetorical move that allows the report to more easily “pass” as trustworthy. In other words, instead of interrogating the assumptions in a report deemed the “final word” on the event, the reader

sees the Commission as an equal partner in the process of making meaning of a text offered not as understanding itself but rather as a “foundation” for understanding. The Commission’s final word in the Preface is a call to the reader “to study, reflect—and act” (xviii). “Act” here refers to taking action against terrorism, but it is also a call to co-create the writerly text—to study it, reflect on it, and make meaning of it. In the discussion that follows, I consider how, in utilizing the conventions of the thriller, the Commission constructs itself not as governmental authority but as a co-reader that finds him- or herself just as surprised by the attacks, their causes, and their aftermath as the audience does. This process of eschewing authority allows certain of the report’s exceptionalist assumptions to pass unnoticed, a point that I will explore further when considering the graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Report*.

The Novel as History

While for Warren the most important question about *The 9/11 Report* centers on the type of novel Americans want it to be, this chapter considers what it means for readers seeking a factual representation of 9/11 to want a novel at all. In “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” White claims, “It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult” (8). In other words, a list of facts remains just that, a list, until it has “impose[d] upon it the form of story” by the historian (6). Story form feels natural and inevitable but is in fact the product of craft and desire. As White explains, “The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, reveries” (27). Nothing about a list of facts requires their

translation into story except for the reader's need for such a story to exist. White asks, "Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see 'the end' in every beginning?" (27). Not surprisingly, September 11th at first presents itself as a straightforward series of events: planes hit buildings, buildings fall down, many people die, and the President calls for war; a day that dawns clear and blue ends with a damaged nation heading into an uncertain future. The list of facts quickly takes the form of a relatable story. But at the moment one asks "why?"—why planes, why hijackers, why the Trade Center, why bin Laden, and so forth—the list of potential questions and answers spirals out of control, resulting in what White calls "[t]he original strangeness, mystery, or exoticism of the events" that can only be "rendered comprehensible by being subsumed under the categories of the plot structure in which they are encoded as a story of a particular kind" (86). Significantly, the report's writers need and desire a structure by which to organize the events of 9/11 just as much as the readers do because they too find themselves at the mercy of the attacks' strangeness and mystery. The emplotment of 9/11 as a thriller arises from the dual desire of author and reader to wrangle the events into some semblance of meaning.

A consideration of the Warren Commission's report on the assassination of John F. Kennedy further clarifies the difference between a typical government report and a report that reads as narrative nonfiction. The Warren Report takes the form of a chronicle in part because its potential questions and answers are significantly limited compared to those surrounding 9/11⁴²: the President is shot, his wounds are detailed, his shooter is

⁴² Admittedly, these limits are imaginary ones placed on the event by Commissioners who either saw nothing more to investigate or chose not to investigate as much as they could (the point of view taken even

furnished, that shooter's home life is detailed (loner, trouble in school), the shooter himself is killed, and the shooter's shooter is tried and sentenced to death. The first twenty-six pages of the Warren Report summarize this sequence of events, while the collection of evidence that supports the summary composes the remaining 900 pages. Even the Commission's list of twelve recommendations is fairly limited in scope, focusing on Secret Service details for Presidents (the subject of the first seven recommendations), the FBI's relationship with the Secret Service (recommendation no. 8), the President's physician (no. 9), laws related to assassination and "defectors" (nos. 10 and 11), and the dissemination of media information related to ongoing legal investigations (no. 12). With the exception of the twelfth recommendation, which could impact the public's right to information about legal proceedings, none of the Commission's recommendations directly impact everyday life for the report's readers. In comparison, everything about the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, from airport security to biometrics to border control, impacts not just the typical American but anyone, citizen or not, wishing to travel within or to leave the country.

Furthermore, the style of the Warren report reflects a need to chronicle rather than explain the events of the assassination. For example, in cataloguing the choice of Kennedy's parade route, the authors write, "On November 8, when Lawson was briefed on the itinerary for the trip to Dallas, he was told that 45 minutes had been allotted for a motorcade procession. . . . Lawson was not specifically instructed to select the parade route, but he understood that this was one of his functions" (31). These sentences reflect a basic retelling of commission testimony and are representative of the general style of the

by more conservative conspiracy theorists who wish to connect the assassination to larger political movements in the country).

report's litany of facts. Even those pieces of data surrounding the most contested aspects of the report, such as the number of shots fired by Oswald, are presented in a straightforward, assertive manner despite the ambiguity of the information relayed. In the "Number of Shots" section, which is not quite a page long, the Commission reports, "The consensus among the witnesses at the scene was that three shots were fired. However, some heard only two shots, while others testified that they heard four and perhaps as many as five or six shots. The difficulty of accurate perception of the sound of gunshots required careful scrutiny of all of this testimony regarding the number of shots" (110). Here significance lies in what the Commission does not do: they report a "consensus," follow up that consensus with testimony that defies the consensus, and then report the difficulty of discerning the sound of a fired shot from other noises. This set of facts at once supports and denies the Commission's conclusions while the description of background noise presumably explains that tension but is not adequately linked to it. When discrepancies occur, they are reported as "the evidence is inconclusive" (111), shifting the burden from a Commission that cannot make meaning to a body of evidence that cannot make itself mean. The Warren Report consists mainly of bare facts; when the facts are insufficient to explain the assassination, the events simply go unexplained.

Compare the above segments of the Warren Report to similarly debated evidence narrated in *The 9/11 Report*. As the authors of the latter report explain, much of what is known about what happened on the planes comes, first, from the reports made by airline crew members who communicated with air traffic controllers and others on the ground and, second, from passengers who made phone calls to family and others. Despite this sizable amount of information from witnesses of varying credibility, not everything that

happened aboard the plane was recorded. For slightly less consequential points of the narrative, the writers use the conditional mood, as when describing the sequence of events prior to the hijacking: “The plane [American Airlines 11] took off at 7:59. Just before 8:14, it had climbed to 26,000 feet. . . . All communications and flight profile data were normal. About this time the ‘Fasten Seatbelt’ sign would usually have been turned off and the flight attendants would have begun preparing for cabin service” (4). Data that is known and verifiable (take-off times, altitudes) appears in the indicative mood, while points based on supposition (including the usual order of in-flight events) appear in the conditional. Regarding the seatbelt sign, further uncertainty is communicated with the word “usually,” implying that the seatbelt sign sometimes goes off and sometimes does not, while the point in the flight at which cabin service begins is less tentative. In contrast, all of the information in the portion of the Warren Report quoted above, questioned or unquestioned, appears in the indicative mood.

An even greater difference between the two reports emerges when considering a more tenuous section of the 9/11 Report. Of the hijacking of Flight 11, the authors write, From this [quoted above] and other evidence, we believe the hijacking began at 8:14 or shortly thereafter. Reports from two flight attendants in the coach cabin, Betty Ong and Madeline “Amy” Sweeney, tell us most of what we know about how the hijacking happened. As it began, some of the hijackers—most likely Wail al Shehri and Waleed al Shehri . . . stabbed the two unarmed flight attendants who would have been preparing for cabin service. We do not know exactly how the hijackers gained access to the cockpit; FAA rules required that the doors remained closed and locked during flight. Ong speculated that they had ‘jammed their way’

in. Perhaps the terrorists stabbed the flight attendants to get a cockpit key, to force one of them to open the cockpit door, or to lure the captain or first officer out of the cockpit. Or the flight attendant may just have been in their way. (4-5)

The authors are careful to temper their assertions when necessary: they “believe” they know when the hijacking began, but they do not know for sure. Most notably, the authors use the phrase “we do not know” rather than “it is not known” or “the evidence does not show,” phrases that would shift the blame onto unexplained gaps in evidence.⁴³ Similarly, when absolutely no evidence exists but a gap in the narrative does, the authors offer pure but clear speculation. After reporting Ong’s assumption that the hijackers “jammed their way” into the cockpit, they offer several narrative-based scenarios: robbery (of the key), hostage (bait for the pilot), or innocent bystander. The inclusion of these scenarios is not entirely necessary for an understanding of the hijackings. Speculation performs two narrative functions here: it awards, when possible, a story to the death of one of the many unnamed dead in the attacks; and it creates a more detailed scene of the flight’s hijacking for the reader.⁴⁴

The most significant phrase of the passage quoted above is “we do not know,” which appears a total of fifteen times according to a computer scan of the digitized report.⁴⁵ With that phrase, the authors of *The 9/11 Report* announce their willingness to

⁴³ A scan of the report shows that the authors only use the phrase “the evidence” to speak of what they know for certain, as in “based on all of the evidence, we have concluded that none of these transactions involved a net transfer of funds to the hijackers” (499).

⁴⁴ Speculation may also serve a third purpose here. White claims that “classic historical accounts always represent attempts both to emplot the historical series adequately and implicitly to come to terms with other plausible emplotments” (“Historical Text” 94). The attempt to imagine what happened in the unnarrated and potentially forever-lost moments of the hijackings thus acts as the authors’ attempts to come to terms with other possible versions of the events.

⁴⁵ For comparison, that phrase only appears once in the Warren report, in a quote from CIA testimony to the commission: “We do not know who might have told Oswald that Azque or any other Cuban had been or

reveal what they simply do not know. The phrase appears in relatively innocuous contexts, as when the Commission notes, “We do not know who from Defense participated” in a multiagency teleconference the morning of the attacks (37). In this case, the unknown communicates a sense of disorder among the FAA, White House, and Defense Department, a disorder that the Commission generally refers to when it considers what went wrong on September 11th. But elsewhere, “we do not know” communicates a sense of unease and a lack of intelligence necessary to guarantee security, as when the authors admit “we do not know for certain” why several of the hijackers spent time in California. In this instance (which is also the second paragraph of Chapter 7, “The Attack Looms”), the unknown gestures both to the movements of the hijackers that went unnoticed in the years leading up to the attack and to the possibility that the same kinds of unknowns still exist. Elsewhere, “we do not know” communicates problems in evacuation procedure. Regarding an announcement in the South Tower advising occupants that the building was safe, the authors write, “We do not know the reason for the announcement” because those who might have made it died in the collapse; however, they go on to note that “the prospect of another plane hitting the second building was beyond the contemplation of anyone giving advice” (289). Together, these sets of unknowns (regarding evacuation procedure and terrorist activities prior to 9/11) function together to shift blame from the rescuers who could not have imagined the possibility of attack to the agencies that should have been able to imagine it.

was to be replaced, but we speculate that Silvia Duran or some Soviet official might have mentioned it” (310). The phrase “it is not known,” however, appears five times, in cases such as “it is not known what names other than Oswald’s were listed on that [postal] form” (312). All occurrences of “it is not known” in the Warren report center around a name (and speculated accomplice) listed on the mailbox Oswald used in New Orleans. Yet even in this single admission of an unknown factor, the Commission presumes that the name, Hidell, was “merely a creation for [Oswald’s] own purposes” (644-45).

The 9/11 Report as Contemporary Thriller

In addition to the sentence-level impact of the “we do not know” phrases detailed above, the Commission’s willingness to admit to the gaps in its knowledge influences a reading of *The 9/11 Report* as thriller. First, while those lacks and omissions occur infrequently, they lend the authors significant credibility, encouraging readers to assume that any official willing to admit what he does not know might be more likely to craft an authentic, trustworthy account of the events. Likewise, the acknowledgement of the lack—of helplessness, of unknown unknowns, of unanswered questions—serves to dissolve the line between the Commission and the reading public. The “we” combined with “do not know” draws writer and reader together into a sense of shared inquiry and vulnerability. And it is in this *shared* vulnerability that the report gains its status as a thriller: together, as a unified American public, the authors and audience revisit the events of September 11th, and are in turn shocked and saddened by what they find there.

Critic Anne Longmuir notes that the thriller is “a notoriously difficult genre to define” because it spans subgenres and so becomes a catch-all term for everything from hard-boiled detective stories to spy novels (129).⁴⁶ She lists the following characteristics of the genre: “Thrillers are generally tightly plotted, using suspense and the lure of a final denouement or resolution to keep the reader’s attention”; “the language of the thriller is distinctive . . . simplistic prose ensures a quick and easy read”; and the plot pits an individual against “a conspiring group” (130; 132). Together, these characteristics make for a story in which “the movement . . . towards denouement or the uncovering of a

⁴⁶ I rely on Longmuir’s definition in part because her study focuses on Don DeLillo’s *Players* and *Running Dog*, making her terms appropriate for literary (non)fiction. Additionally, I am not alone in calling *The 9/11 Report* a thriller—many of the report’s critics, including Ignatius and Crampton (discussed above) use that term. However, other than applying “thriller” as a label, they do not delve further into the construction of the report as thriller.

previously hidden truth also indicates the genre's assumption that the real can be accessed" (131). That is, while the term "thriller" generally applies to works of fiction, those fictions represent a world in which knowledge is accessible and resolution possible.

Reading *The 9/11 Report* in terms of Longmuir's definition of the genre, it is not difficult to see how its language and plot interact to produce a thriller. Several critics have noted the report's spare, straightforward style.⁴⁷ The same impulse that motivates the authors to declare "we do not know" as opposed to "it is not known" results in short, varied sentences that move the reader quickly through the events of the day. For example, in the account of the hijacking of Flight 93, they write, "All [passengers] understood the plane had been hijacked. They said the hijackers wielded knives and claimed to have a bomb. The hijackers were wearing red bandanas, and they forced the passengers to the back of the aircraft" (13). This paragraph (which is itself quite short—only one sentence is omitted from the passage above) quickly communicates all the information collected from the passengers, creating a unanimous version of their eyewitness accounts that relates the gravity of their situation. The same pace and tone characterizes the report's lengthy exposition of al Qaeda's years-long planning of the attacks. Describing the "Planes Operation," they write, "According to KSM [Khalid Sheikh Mohammed], he started to think about attacking the United States after Yousef returned to Pakistan.... Like Yousef, KSM reasoned he could best influence U.S. policy by targeting the country's economy. New York, which KSM considered the economic capital of the United States, therefore became the primary target" (153). In this instance, in the space of

⁴⁷ In addition to the reviews by Ignatius, Warren, and Crampton discussed earlier, Richard A. Posner, in "The 9/11 Report: A Dissent," calls the report "an improbable literary triumph": "the execution was in one vital respect superb: the [report] is an uncommonly lucid, even riveting, narrative of the attacks...". However, while Posner respects the style of the report, he calls his review "a dissent" because he finds fault with the Commission's final recommendations.

a paragraph, the report quickly and sensibly answers one of the “why” questions, namely “Why attack the World Trade Center a second time?” The report goes on to explain that KSM learned from the first attack that “bombs and explosives could be problematic, and that he needed to graduate to a more novel form of attack” (153). Here, the report demonstrates that the impetus for the second attack on New York is the failure of the first attack and, further, that the first attack creates the parameters (location, degree, kind) that control the planning and implementation of the second attack. With its short, plain sentences, the report clearly matches the style of those thrillers that lay bare complicated plots and devastating events.

The excerpts above characterize the report’s easy-to-read style; a full review of the report reveals no sustained deviation from the general pattern of short sentences. But even such a brief examination of the report’s sentence structure suggests that this unrelenting tone and pace might become unbearable after several chapters. To avoid becoming bogged down in an endless string of sentences, the authors create tension through a non-chronological, interwoven narrative that begins *in medias res* and is punctuated by cliffhangers as the story shifts back and forth between al Qaeda’s preparation for September 11th attacks and the United States’ series of minor run-ins with the organization throughout the 1990s. The chapter titles demonstrate the report’s movement back and forth between a discussion of terrorist activities abroad and counterterrorist activities at home. After the brief preface, the report begins with ““We Have Some Planes,”” a 50-page account of the events of September 11th. Initially, the referent of the chapter title is unclear; it seems as if it could have been an American on the ground, but in fact it was taken from radio communication with the hijacker piloting

Flight 11. The “we” serves multiple functions here: it announces the plain, straightforward style of the report; it communicates, via ironic understatement, the nation’s perception of the threat as minor and containable, a perception that would prove wrong over the hours and years following the attacks; it foreshadows the ways in which the American intelligence and aviation security communities would be implicated in the failure to stop the attacks; and, finally, it pulls together not just reader and Commission, but Americans and their perceived enemies, into shared circumstances that ended the alleged American holiday from history and forced the nation to confront al Qaeda.⁴⁸

The report thus begins with a description of September 11th as singular event and then moves back and forth between explanations of bin Laden’s rise to power and the United States’ response. Chapters 2 and 3, “The Foundation of the New Terrorism” and “Counterterrorism Evolves,” attempt to explain why the United States became the focus of a fatwa and how the United States viewed and intended to cope with that threat. Notably, the report humanizes “the terrorists” by working to explain the historical and economic roots of jihad as a typical and expected, rather than exotic, symptom of modernization: “By the 1990s, high birthrates and declining rates of infant mortality had produced a common problem throughout the Muslim world: a large, steadily increasing population of young men without any reasonable expectation of suitably or steady employment...” (53-54). Granted, this explanation can also read as an oversimplification of the problem or, worse, an attempt to read a non-Western subject position through a Western lens that fails to account for (or even fails to see) a more nuanced set of circumstances that would account for the growth of support for al Qaeda. However,

⁴⁸ Confront in terms of military operations, of course, but also confront in the sense that the general public was forced to think about al Qaeda’s standpoint vis à vis American-Middle East relations. Essentially, “we have some planes” marks the moment when the Other’s voice can no longer be ignored.

because this is a report designed for the general public, even a misreading has value in that it builds upon the report's initial construction of the "we": the hijackers are not constructed as unknowable enemies but rather as relatable humans subject to understandable economic and social forces. The "Counterterrorism Evolves" chapter thus works in tandem with "The Foundation" chapter to explain how the United States understood and attempted to respond to the first wave of al Qaeda attacks.

The report moves along rather swiftly in this way, alternating between ever-escalating threats and smaller attacks perpetrated by al Qaeda, followed by summaries and more often critiques of the United States' response. Chapter 5, "Al Qaeda Aims at the American Homeland," traces the beginnings of the 9/11 plan starting in 1999 and explains that, "by the spring and summer of 2000 . . . two operatives assigned to the planes operation were already in the United States. Three of the four Hamburg cell members would soon arrive" (173). Immediately thereafter, Chapter 6, "From Threat to Threat," returns to the status of U.S. counterterrorism work in 1999, focusing on the strength of the response to the millennium threat. To assist the reader in this movement backward and forward in time, each chapter begins with a recap that links it to the relevant timeline and context from previous chapters. Chapter 6 thus begins, "In Chapters 3 and 4 we described how the U.S. government adjusted its existing agencies and capacities to address the emerging threat from Usama Bin Ladin [sic] and his associates" (174). Similarly, Chapter 7, "The Attack Looms," recaps the context and time frame discussed earlier in the report: "In chapter 5 we described the Southeast Asia travels of Nawaf al Hazmi, Khalid al Mihdhar, and others in January 2000 on the first part of the 'planes operation'" (215). Notably, while each chapter, whether focused on al Qaeda or

the United States, begins similarly, their endings are quite different. The al Qaeda chapters end with a sense of tension, movement, and action, while the U.S. chapters end with a sense of slowness and opportunities lost. Thus Chapter 6, which covers the millennium, the attacks on the USS *Cole*, and the shift from the Clinton to the Bush administration, notes that, on September 10, 2001, the U.S. was finalizing a “three-phase, multiyear plan to pressure and perhaps ultimately topple the Taliban leadership” but that “Funding still needed to be located. The military component remained unclear” (214). Meanwhile, Chapter 7, which describes the preparation for the attacks, ends with, “The plan that started with a proposal by KSM in 1996 had evolved to overcome numerous obstacles. Now 19 men waited in nondescript hotel rooms to board four flights the next morning” (253). While the graphic adaptation of the report will be treated later in this chapter, it is worth mentioning here that Jacobson and Colón consider their timeline of the hijackings to be the biggest accomplishment of their book because it shows simultaneous action on the four flights in a way that, they claim, text cannot. Yet it is clear that the Commission also presents the report as two timelines, represented as close to “simultaneously” as can be accomplished in a narrative, in order to demonstrate a declaration of action and successful follow-through (al Qaeda) contrasted with a lack of clarity of mission and a painfully slow response (United States). Rhetorically, the Commission uses this contrast in timelines as a means to advocate for the bureaucratic reforms they detail in the report’s recommendations section. But, for the reader, the contrast in timelines functions to create an undeniable sense of tension upon being forced to witness al Qaeda’s swift (and ultimately unstoppable) march to attack.

By the end of Chapter 8, ““The System Was Blinking Red,”” the authors state,

“Officials were alerted across the world. Many were doing everything they possibly could to respond to the threats. . . . We see little evidence that the progress of the plot was disturbed by any government action. The U.S. government was unable to capitalize on mistakes made by al Qaeda. Time ran out” (277). While the reader already knows that time ran out and that none of the actions taken by the United States would thwart the attacks, reiterating “time ran out” functions to resolve the narrative tension built to this point in the report. The thrill—of both watching al Qaeda build its plot and of watching the United States fail at every turn to stop it—is gone. The narrative switches from an interwoven set of timelines to a straightforward assessment of the attacks’ aftermath. Having already detailed the hijackings themselves at the beginning of the report, Chapter 9, “Heroism and Horror,” picks up with “Emergency response is a product of preparedness. On the morning of September 11, 2001, the last best hope . . . rested not with national policymakers but with private firms and local public servants, especially first responders” (278). Time runs out, the attacks occur in the blank space between Chapters 8 and 9, and the emergency response begins.

Ultimately, the thriller conventions that control the tone and structure of the report to this point normalize the attacks or, in Longmuir’s words, “indicate that the real can be accessed” (131). As White explains, narrative “endow[s] what originally appears to be problematical and mysterious with the aspect of a recognizable, because it is a familiar, form” (“Historical Text” 98). By the story’s end, the audience can imagine how an initially unimaginable event came to be. Further, what the narrative manages to create—and what a simple chronology could not show—is an indictment not of a particular agency or official but of time itself. Simply, al Qaeda and the United States have an

unequal amount of every resource but time. They begin their actions and counteractions at the same moment, and yet al Qaeda uses its time better. The report thus utilizes the pacing of the thriller to demonstrate that the United States' greatest failure was, in fact, pacing, an inevitable outcome of what the Commission sees as a glaring lack of interagency communication and streamlined federal responses to threats. The report's pacing contributes to its trustworthiness: the reader is told that the United States moves too slowly, but the reader also *feels* that difference in pace when comparing the al Qaeda chapters to the United States chapters, allowing the reader to locate credibility not just in the text but in the personal experience of reading.

The 9/11 Report stands as neither a polemic indictment of the failures of government to protect its people nor an unthinking reassurance of the nation's unbeatable power and eventual success. Even at the moments when one might expect a reiteration of exceptionalist discourse, that reiteration never comes; in its place, the reader finds nuanced understanding. In Chapter 11, the Commission writes, "America stood out as an object for admiration, envy, and blame. This created a kind of cultural asymmetry. To us, Afghanistan seemed very far away. To members of al Qaeda, America seemed very close. In a sense, they were more globalized than we were" (340). Here, the authors recognize "the terrorists" as selves, as different but equal subjects. Against those subjects they pose the "us" of Americans, which draws together reader, author, and subject of the text as a unified individual. Indeed, as Longmuir points out, all thrillers create such an "us vs. them" framework that aligns the reader with the thriller's protagonist (in this case, the U.S. government). The authors therefore recognize the nation's exceptionalist viewpoint while at the same time imagining what the nation must look like from the

standpoint of an outsider. Such rhetorical moves are unexpected in a government report, and they account for its credibility among even resistant readers. Yet, in the very act of drawing together author, subject, and reader, the Commission acknowledges its inability to work completely outside that American sense of self. That is, the Commission is composed of Americans writing about America for Americans; while the authors display at times a remarkable ability to see the United States from the Other's point of view, they also slip at times into an uninterrogated exceptionalist mode. In the following sections, I read *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* as a means of accessing the unacknowledged exceptionalist standpoint that influences the writing of the Commission's report, especially in terms of the portrayal of technology, surveillance, and national defense.

“As neutral as possible”: Exceptionalist Discourse in *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* (2006)

If *The 9/11 Report* (2004) defies the genre of government report through an engagement with historiography, its graphic adaptation, drawn by Ernie Colón and edited by Sid Jacobson,⁴⁹ defies genre in part because no generic designation exists that can quite contain it. Colón and Jacobson are quick to note that the 144-page adaptation of the far lengthier report is *not* a comic book. In fact, for comic book creators who have a long history working for Marvel, DC, and other publishers, the two appear unnaturally quick to shrug off that genre. In an interview, Jacobson asserts, “I think we both object to the whole thought of this as a comic book. This is not a comic book. It's a graphic

⁴⁹ Both Jacobson and Colón receive equal author credit for the text, but in interviews they make it clear that Jacobson determined the text and sent it to Colón to be drawn, in keeping with a similar collaborative process the two have practiced for decades.

presentation, using many, many devices, to tell what exactly has been said and only that” (“The Sept. 11 Commission Report as Graphic Novel”). When the interviewer points out that the term “comic book” has become the default term because “graphic novel,” the comic book’s more legitimate shelf-mate, does not accurately describe the adaptation, Jacobson explains, “We have sort of come up with the idea that it’s graphic journalism. [A]s big a seller as the book was, it was very difficult to follow and to understand. And I’m sure that most people who did read it - I mean, this was written as a Congressional report - and I’m not sure how many Congressmen fully understood because they haven’t done much about it” (“The Sept. 11 Commission”).⁵⁰ Within this interview, Colón and Jacobson lay bare the chief critical tension within the graphic adaptation. They appear nearly obsessed with their claims to scientific objectivity—“what exactly has been said and only that”—and their desire to keep their personal politics from influencing the creation of the adaptation.⁵¹ Yet Jacobson cannot quite keep those views contained: his point that it seems Congresspersons could not have read the report because they have so far failed to act on its recommendations reveals a certain frustration with the Bush administration.⁵² At the same time he clearly attributes his work’s legitimacy and

⁵⁰ The tentativeness evident in Jacobson’s response stems from the fact that he is speaking live on the radio during a listeners’ question-and-answer segment. In context, his point is that he cannot understand how anyone who reads the report can be expected to understand it, given that (and this is where his political opinion comes in) it appears that not even Congress has read and understood it.

⁵¹ In another interview Colón states, “What we tried to avoid was any hint of our own political opinions. That was absolutely imperative for us” (Turner “The Trouble with Drawing Dick Cheney”).

⁵² In the NPR interview cited above, the pair mentions their intent to create a graphic novel on the War on Terror. *After 9/11: America’s War on Terror (2001 -)*, which adapts journalism on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, was published in 2008. The book’s title alone, with its unending blank space within the parentheses for the war’s dates, speaks to the team’s dissatisfaction with the War on Terror as a “solution” for the problem of terrorism. Reading their *9/11 Report* with this second text in mind complicates any attempt to accept their assertion that their politics do not influence the adaptation (even beyond the acknowledgement that any such claim to a sort of superhuman objectivity is impossible, and that graphic journalism especially works to undermine such claims in the first place).

authority to its faithfulness to the textual report and so uses the term “graphic journalism” to align the adaptation with print journalism’s same claims to neutrality and objectivity.

Colón and Jacobson most certainly create a work of graphic journalism, but not because they fulfill a claim to absolute objectivity. Rather, their text fulfills the standard definition of the genre precisely because it is not at all the neutral, “authorless” text they want it to be. According to Dan Archer, graphic or comics journalism “expose[s] the fallacy of one single ‘objective ‘truth,’ often by including the reporter (and his [point of view]) in the story” (“An Introduction to Comics Journalism”).⁵³ Graphic journalism emphasizes the work of the artist as a creator of meaning, not simply a neutral conduit for information from source to reader. Thus even when Colón describes the process of removing himself from the adaptation, he clearly remains there. On the process of drawing well-known political figures, Colón states, “I wanted to be as neutral as possible. . . . If I found an unflattering photo of (Vice President) Cheney, I looked for a more neutral one, even for (Michael) Chertoff (secretary of Homeland Security), which was no easy task” (“9/11 Gets a Graphic Retelling”). Colón’s presence in the text makes itself known in these small ways but also in larger ones, as when he states that he simply could not draw the Trade Center’s jumpers: “It would have personally offended me to draw that. I just couldn’t. . . . We didn’t want to do anything that would offend anyone who lost someone” (“Graphic Retelling”). Despite their desire to remain objective and

⁵³ Similarly, according to critic Todd Schack, “the images [graphic journalists] create are not beholden to the same standards of objective truth [as traditional photojournalism] – the audience of a graphic non-fiction work can simultaneously entertain the contradictory notion that drawn images are at once true, but not actual” (114). Schack gestures toward a difference between the apprehension of print and graphic representations: readers expect print journalism to represent an event “as it was.” Likewise, photojournalism supposedly captures an even purer truth of the event, though like print journalism its “truth” remains housed within the journalist who chooses shots, framing, lighting, and so forth. Graphic journalism falls somewhere between print and photojournalism regarding its truth claim, resulting in the readers’ sense of the images as “true, but not actual.”

outside their text, Colón and Jacobson cannot create such an adaptation; but their failure⁵⁴ generates an important site of critical interrogation for both the graphic and textual versions of *The 9/11 Report*.

Colón and Jacobson create an adaptation⁵⁵ of *The 9/11 Report* that reveals how exceptionalist discourse shapes the American response to September 11th. As discussed in Chapter One, exceptionalist thinking guides the public perception of both government and domestic institutions in the United States: the nation generally remains invulnerable to attack because of its military and technological superpowers but, in the event of attack, the country's most exceptional citizens (military service persons and first responders in particular) will save its most vulnerable (women and children). As interpreters and adapters of *The 9/11 Report*, Jacobson and Colón read the report from an exceptionalist standpoint that ultimately colors the adaptation they create. First, as other critics have noted,⁵⁶ a stark gender divide controls the adaptation's depiction of the immediate response to September 11th: men risked their lives to save women, thereby ensuring the survival of the nation.⁵⁷ While the textual report does not display an obvious gender imbalance, instead noting the equally heroic (and, if not heroic, stoic) acts of women, the visuals of the graphic adaptation clearly present women as helplessly trapped or incapacitated and in need of rescue. Yet, as both the graphic and textual reports allow,

⁵⁴ Which is hardly a failure at all, in that they fail at the impossible task of stripping the text of their authorship.

⁵⁵ Jacobson also calls the adaptation a "translation." In the NPR interview he explains, "I think we felt it was important that this be translated for the adult, for the child, for anyone to understand what was in this damaging and very important report."

⁵⁶ I discuss essays by Anna Wiederhold and Bob Britten later in this section.

⁵⁷ See Chapter One's discussion of Susan Faludi's *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*. A gendered myth of exceptionalism controls notions of risk, heroism, and salvation; women exist to be saved by men, whose ultimate goal is to ensure that the women continue to create new citizens for the nation.

delays in communication combined with the magnitude of the attack prevented first responders from saving many victims or preventing the collapse of the Towers.

A series of knowledge gaps—from what the government did not know before the attacks to communication breakdowns during the abbreviated rescue attempt—thus pose a significant challenge to discourses related to the nation’s military and technological invulnerability. As a means of reasserting the nation’s exceptional status, Colón’s drawings primarily function to construct the nation’s technological supremacy against the primitive capabilities of its enemies in Afghanistan. While the textual report portrays the Saudi nationals as possessing advantages of skill and strength and al Qaeda as a differently-abled but equally powerful adversary, the graphic report emphasizes a specifically pre-modern technological lack tied to stereotypes of national origin. Despite the ultimate success of al Qaeda’s mission, the graphic report depicts Middle Eastern men as uncivilized desert dwellers whose primitive technologies could never hope to pose a sustained challenge to the clearly superlative technologies employed by the United States. Additionally, Colon and Jacobson emphasize the nation’s unparalleled ability to gather and disseminate knowledge—a point underscored by the very creation of two versions of *The 9/11 Report*—as further evidence that the United States’ exceptional status, though challenged, ultimately has not been dismantled by the attacks. The following reading of *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* considers formal elements of graphic journalism before examining the adaptation’s exceptionalist understanding of gender and technology.

September 11th appears especially worthy of graphic interpretation because it remains primarily a visual event; indeed, the tools and techniques of comics journalism⁵⁸ are stretched to their limits in the 9/11 adaptation. Critic Tim Gauthier notes in his discussion of the graphic memoirs *In the Shadow of No Towers*, *Tribeca Sunset*, and *American Widow*, “since the initial narratives were largely conveyed through images, it stands to reason that a medium that incorporates both text and image, such as the graphic novel, might have more success with the ‘translation’” of the event into an understandable narrative (370). Comics generate meaning in two ways: through the interplay of text and image, and through the utilization of the blank space (gutters between frames) of the page.⁵⁹ First, graphic journalism draws strength from its combination of text and visuals that “serve to make both more significant and deepen the understanding of complex issues” (Schack 121) by “blending words with images that . . . together create a multi-layered narrative that carries the potential to create understanding on an intellectual level as well as feeling on an emotional, visceral level” (110). In comics, “words and images create unsynthesized narrative tracks” (Chute 108), meaning that text and image do not simply offer two versions of the same story; instead, each medium alternately underscores, deviates from, and even contradicts the meaning of the

⁵⁸ I use the terms “graphic journalism” and “comic[s] journalism” interchangeably. “Graphic” appears to be the preferred term as it connotes a certain level of legitimacy, but both terms can be used to describe the same kind of text. Additionally, critic Hillary Chute notes, “Graphic novel is a much more common and recognizable term than graphic narrative. Graphic novel—which took shape as a marketing term—has a specific history in the second half of the twentieth century. . . . Decades later, we find ‘graphic novel’ sections in many bookstores. Yet graphic novel is often a misnomer. Many fascinating works grouped under this umbrella. . . aren’t novels at all: they are rich works of nonfiction” (“Comics as Literature” 453). As mentioned earlier, I use graphic/comic in combination with journalism in part because it is the term Jacobson and Colón claim. The adaption could likewise be called a graphic narrative, though “narrative” might connote the very same level of authorial invention that Jacobson wants to avoid. Finally, “graphic novel” is generally inappropriate but is sometimes used by interviewers in conversation with Jacobson and Colón simply because they lack other terminology.

⁵⁹ An author’s particular drawing style also contributes to the text’s meaning. As I discuss below, Colón is a traditional comic book artist who draws in the easily recognizable style of the superhero narrative.

other. Just as text creates one level of significance, the empty spaces of the page generate meaning equivalent to that of the filled spaces. Hillary Chute notes that “The form is built on the ongoing counterpoint of presence—in frames or panels—and absence, the white space between frames where a reader projects causality” (108). Causality is important here: as readers move through the space and time of the page, they mentally create relationships (that may in fact run counter to the words they read) in the blank spaces between the succession of events they see (Chute 108-09).⁶⁰

The adaptation poses a particular challenge to attempts to read it as a work of graphic journalism, however. Typically, the author of the text creates both word and image; this is the case in 9/11 graphic memoirs such as Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers*.⁶¹ But in the adaptation, Colón and Jacobson strictly adhere to the text of the Commission’s original report. While Colón draws all of the images by hand, often working from pictures of key figures in the story, Jacobson begins with a massive amount of prose that he edits down to a manageable, adaptable size, choosing representative portions of the narrative that doubtless represent his own bias as well. Moreover, that text fills the adaptation’s gutters, occupying the space between panels and drawings that would otherwise go empty and thereby over-determining the meaning of that space. Like a patchwork quilt, blocks of text appear not only in the drawn panels but also in the spaces between them, literally moving the reader-viewer from image to image by means

⁶⁰ In her 2008 essay “Comics as Literature: Reading Graphic Narrative,” Chute explains, “Comics might be defined as a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially. Comics [sic] moves forward in time through the space of the page, through its progressive counter-point of presence and absence . . . [A] reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of reading and looking for meaning” (452). I treat temporality below in the discussion of the adaptation’s timeline

⁶¹ Notably, this is not the case for Alissa Torres’ *American Widow*, which is illustrated by Sungyoon Choi.

of text directly quoted from *The 9/11 Report*.⁶² Artist and theorist Scott McCloud claims that the frames of a graphic novel create a “balance between the visible and invisible” by “[giving the reader] something to imagine between the comics” (“The Visual Magic of Comics”), and Chute claims that the gutter allows readers to imagine the causal relationship between images (and between text and image). When the gutter is filled with text, the space loses its meaning-making function. It would seem, then, that Colón’s drawings might remain a simple representation of the text on the page given that they are yoked both to the original text and to Jacobson’s editing hand. But instead, the erosion of the textual report via editing results in an accretion of meaning in the visual: Colón’s images tell their own story of 9/11 and its aftermath, deviating both from the script of *The 9/11 Report* and the adaptation’s intent to strictly adhere to and objectively represent the Commission’s findings. As the discussion that follows will show, Colón’s reliance on gender and racial stereotypes—visuals that are unsupported by the original text—results in an exceptionalist 9/11 narrative that occupies itself with saving American women, lionizing American men, and constructing both of these groups against primitive Middle Easterners trapped in a darker age.

The representation of women as helplessly in need of rescue appears from the very beginning of *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*, and a comparison to the textual report makes clear that this depiction stems from Colón’s imagination rather than the original text. The adaptation begins with a lengthy timeline that depicts the hijacking

⁶² Arguably the adaptation performs what Chute calls the “manifest handling of its own artifice, its attention to its seams. Its formal grammar rejects transparency and renders textualization conspicuous, inscribing the context in its graphic presentation” (460). That is, Jacobson and Colón could be drawing attention to the gutter to call attention to the fact that causality in the original *9/11 Report* is constructed, not actual. However, given that they ultimately create an exceptionalist version of the report, this interpretation seems unlikely.

and subsequent crashes of the four planes.⁶³ As such, the majority of women depicted in the timeline are flight attendants. Aboard Flight 175, a small inset frame depicts an even smaller blonde woman asking, “Pillow, anyone?” (5). The authors invent this dialogue to stand in for the report’s explanation that cabin service began on Flight 175 before the hijacking began, but in context with the only other dialogue bubble on the page (a security officer holding out his hand and saying “Hold it there, sir!” to one of the hijackers who has set off a metal detector), an immediate association between women as subservient helpers and men as dominant policing figures begins to form. A similar visual (small panel depicting flight attendant with magazines) appears as the introductory frame for Flight 77. Meanwhile, on the timeline for Flight 11, the hijackers have begun their attack on the flight crew. While the male pilots display surprised and angry faces (one pilot looks on as another is about to be stabbed in the back), a female flight attendant struggles to break free from the arms of an attacker, who covers her mouth with his hand and places his other hand at the small of her back. Her arms are splayed, her eyes are terrified, and her skirt is pulled up considerably above her knees—these are visual markers of sexual violence that did not occur, according to the Commission’s findings.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the hijackers appear to pose a threat of sexual violence such as when, on Flight 175, a hijacker appears with his face and mouth close to the ear of another flight attendant, his eyes leering and his mouth slightly open. The female attendant, meanwhile, looks on with a pained, fearful expression (8). While the threat and actuality of physical

⁶³ I discuss the significance of the form of the timeline in the concluding section of this chapter and focus more on the textual and graphic content here.

⁶⁴ In the textual report, the words “rape,” “sex,” and “sexual” never occur. “Assault” occurs 12 times in reference to physical attacks. Arguably, given the U.S. government’s habit of ignoring sexual violence in military contexts, Colón may well be accurate in his depiction of a threat of sexual violence, but no testimony exists to substantiate his reading.

violence extend to everyone on the planes, only women fall victim to a sexualized threat invented by Colón and Jacobson.

Following the depictions of the attacks on the flight attendants, women all but disappear from the timeline, appearing in a ratio of roughly one woman per eight to ten men per frame in those frames with crowds of people. Close-up frames featuring one or two men contain no women at all. In general, women appear either standing and waiting for something to happen or looking on in fear. Meanwhile, the men act: they look at computers (8), make phone calls (9), and shout orders (10). One exception occurs when Flight 77's Barbara Olson calls her husband, the Solicitor General, to report the hijacking (10). Olson looks on angrily, saying, "They have knives and box cutters!" In this case, Olson's report to Ted Olson comes directly from the textual report (*The 9/11 Report* 9). Olson stands as the adaptation's most active, effective woman and, not surprisingly, she appears as a strong character in the textual report. But when Jacobson and Colón must fill in the blanks and imagine what the men and women on the ground and on the flights were doing, they create prone, lifeless women who at most scream and cry (e.g. in the conflict between passengers and hijackers on Flight 93 [12]) but more generally sit and wait for nothing in particular (e.g. in the Cleveland Traffic Control Center, where a woman looks on with her arm draped across a chair while two men discuss the hijacking of Flight 93 [13]).⁶⁵

The timeline thus provides an overview not just of the attacks but also of Colón and Jacobson's depiction of women as equal parts helpless and useless. Chapter 1 of the

⁶⁵ Additionally, one disembodied female arm appears pushing against the cockpit door of Flight 93, alongside two male arms. The male arms are muscular and large; the female hand is small, with long fingernails, a wedding band, and a bracelet (16). The only other apparent action available to women is to cradle fallen men in their arms (9, 10).

adaptation concludes with an overview of government actions on the ground and, as aboard the flights, women stand or sit to watch footage of the attacks on the news while men perform some sort of action (e.g. talking on phones and looking at computer screens at the Defense Department and FAA offices ([26-29])). Only one female actor, Condoleezza Rice, appears in this section on “National Crisis Management.” Rice reports the attacks to Bush in language taken from the textual report (35). Meanwhile, an unnamed woman with noticeably long, red fingernails stands over Dick Cheney as he observes the second plane hit the Towers. The chapter ends with a drawing of the ten-member Commission offering its conclusions on the attacks. The figures take the shape of an inverted pyramid. Seven members are grouped together, their torsos drawn in black and their heads white. In front of these men stand Kean and Hamilton, the chairs of the Commission; they are also mainly black figures with black-and-white-sketched heads. Inexplicably, the Commission’s lone female member, Jamie Gorlick, appears in front of Kean and Hamilton, her torso white (presumably to offset it from the black torsos of the men against whom she is drawn). Oddly, all of the Commission members (including Gorlick) smile. Gorlick is thus set apart from the other members of the Commission only on the basis of her gender. Moreover, given that the Commission acts as a single body, not as separate members with individual concerns and recommendations, Gorlick should appear with the seven men, headed by Kean and Hamilton. This depiction of Gorlick reinforces the adaptation’s general view of women as inherently different from (and necessarily weaker than) the men alongside whom they appear.

Just as women disappear from Chapter 1 after the hijackings get underway, they practically disappear from the narrative as a whole in those chapters that describe

terrorism and counterterrorism measures in the years leading up to September 11th.⁶⁶ For example, in Chapter 2, which focuses on the formation of al Qaeda, exactly two drawings that include female figures appear. In a depiction of the aftermath of the embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam, one woman struggles to walk and is assisted by a man; the other woman stoops over a man who has fallen down (38). Likewise, in a depiction of the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan, a crying woman clutches an infant as she runs from a gang of men brandishing long swords and pistols (51). The text thus draws Western⁶⁷ and non-Western women together into shared experiences of either absence or helpless presence. Indeed, while women are perhaps understandably missing from the al Qaeda chapters, they still fail to feature prominently in the chapters on the American response to al Qaeda. In Chapters 3 and 4 on U.S. counterterrorism measures, one woman appears in a drawing of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, cordoned off from the action (a group of male police officers and firefighters) by a line of yellow police tape (39). A lone female hand (again with long red fingernails) appears receiving a folded flag of an American soldier killed in Somalia (43), symbolizing the effect of that action on the women (families and children) of the homeland. When women occasionally move to the center of the action, as in the depiction of the CIA's counterterrorism offices, they rarely speak. For example, in a group of four men and one woman discussing a 1998 plan to capture bin Laden, three of the four men speak in dialogue balloons; the woman

⁶⁶ The graphic adaptation follows the text's model of an interwoven narrative moving between the terrorist actions and U.S. response to those actions.

⁶⁷ The women in the embassy bombing drawing are clearly American workers, as indicated by their shorter skirts and pale skin. Notably, while the vast majority of victims in the embassy bombings were African locals, not American embassy employees, the drawing depicts the event as of solely Western importance, an observation based on the fact that five of the seven bombing victims shown are white. The textual report, meanwhile, emphasizes the fact that the embassy bombings "failed" in that only 12 of the 212 people killed were Americans. The drawings fail to imagine the impact of the bombings on the African cities in which they occurred.

sits silently, a flower arrangement and a box of pastries directly in her line of sight on the conference table.

Admittedly, Colón and Jacobson cannot insert women into a narrative where they otherwise would not appear; they are rightfully absent from depictions of al Qaeda's attack planning, for example. Yet, even when women ought to figure more prominently, their visual presence is greatly reduced. The clearest evidence comes in the depiction of Condoleezza Rice, who appears for the second time in the graphic adaptation with the rest of the new Bush administration at the end of Chapter 6. Like George Bush, Richard Clarke, Bill Clinton, and Sandy Berger, she is drawn as a headshot (65). Incredibly, Rice never speaks and only appears four more times in the adaptation (66, 79, 99, 102).⁶⁸ She is drawn in profile, her head turned slightly to the left of the page, her mouth closed. Her torso appears once, and in another frame her hand appears, topped by the adaptation's visual shorthand for femininity, long red nails (66). Otherwise, Colón conceives of her as a silent, practically invisible figure that observes action but does not participate in it. Considering the near-erasure of Rice, it is clear that Colón and Jacobson fail to imagine women outside of their designated captive/helper roles; when required to do so, they move them to the adaptation's literal margins, where they disappear into silence.

Absent for most of the adaptation, women only become more visible at the moment rescues begin. Chapter 9, "Heroism and Horror," details the civilian response to the attacks, focusing mainly on the efforts of firefighters to evacuate the Twin Towers.

⁶⁸ Rice's reappearance in Chapter 6 is accurate to the textual report, where she first appears in Chapter 1 and then reappears in Chapter 6. Notably, Bush, Clinton, and Clarke, despite appearing as portraits, speak in dialogue balloons here. Berger and Rice do not speak. Also, for comparison, Clinton appears 192 times in the textual report; Clarke, 445 times; Berger, 292 times; and Bush, 195 times. Rice appears 220 times. Thus, even though Rice appears about as often as Clinton and Bush in the textual report, she is demoted to a bit player in the graphic adaptation. Clinton and Bush are far more visible by comparison.

Unlike in the immediately preceding chapters, here several women appear on each page. Yet their roles remain limited: occasionally, they hold or stand beside an injured man (86); more often, they appear badly injured and in the arms of rescue workers (e.g. a shoeless blonde woman is cradled by a police officer, her skirt sliding to her hips in an image suggesting that physical vulnerability necessarily implies sexual vulnerability [91]); and uninjured women who remain trapped in the towers often appear alongside men who hold or console them (88, 89, 91).⁶⁹ In all of these cases, women become the needy background against which the strength and heroism of men are foregrounded. Just like the male government officials who react to the attacks in Chapter 1, the police officers and firefighters appear in constant action: first they attempt to organize a rescue via phone and radio (87); then they enter the buildings to carry out rescue efforts amidst the civilian evacuation (88); and finally they remain within the Trade Center complex ceaselessly carrying out the rescue effort despite the realized threat of collapse (94). Exactly one female EMT appears in the rescue scenes (91) but, unlike the men who are large and in color, she is a tiny figure in monochromatic yellow, practically blending in with the background. Even as equally responsive and important rescue workers, women fade into invisibility.

Arguably, both the textual report and the national narrative regarding first responders on September 11th imagine the police and firefighters in masculinized mythic roles (e.g. rushing into buildings others are fleeing, carrying incredibly heavy piles of gear) that are perhaps difficult for any narrative construction of the event to defy.

Jacobson and Colón work in a graphic medium traditionally associated with superhero

⁶⁹ Evacuating women also clutch their purses, though men are not shown holding bags or briefcases (97, 98).

characterizations, making it difficult to discern whether they imagine rescue workers as superheroes because they are creating a comic book or their experience with comic books encourages them to see rescue workers as superheroes.⁷⁰ Despite their intense desire to throw off the mantle of the comic book, however, they do nothing to resist the readily available superhero schema and instead rely on that schema in their creation of the rescue narrative. Moreover, while cultural notions of the heroic firefighter stem from the WTC rescue effort, Colón and Jacobson depict the attack on the Pentagon in the same visual terms: a woman, prone on the ground, is attended to by a male EMT while others look on at the burning building (96). The visual representation of women in the graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Report* thus generates an exceptionalist understanding of the threatened nation: the country's redemption by its everyday superheroes requires the existence of women in desperate need of help. As the textual report declares in particularly storied terms, "the last best hope for people working in or visiting the World Trade Center rested not with national policy makers but with private firms and local public servants" (qtd. in Colón 86). Because the government was unable to stop the attacks, its locus of exceptionalism shifts from prevention to preservation. The graphic

⁷⁰ The same chicken-egg question applies to the reader: does the comic simply turn men into superheroes, or do readers automatically see rescue workers as superheroes because the national narrative has been shaped by comics and other blockbuster configurations of disasters? This question aside, Colón most certainly envisions rescuer bodies as superhero bodies: large, muscular, and seemingly all-powerful. Likewise, the villains of the adaptation clearly align with the way Colón tends to imagine villains: dark-haired, often bearded, with small, glaring eyes and leering smiles. I have reviewed a number of Colón's comics produced during his time at DC, including *Arak: Son of Thunder* and *Underworld*. *Underworld's* characters are surprisingly diverse: the comic is a police procedural that features both female and African American police officers. But *Arak* exoticizes everyone in its Dark Ages universe, from its Native American protagonist to its various Norse, Danish, and Mongolian villains. (Muslim characters reportedly surface as well, but I was not able to locate any such issues as of this writing.) It is hard to describe *Arak* other than to say that it appears to have been attempting, along with its companion comic *Amethyst: Princess of Gemworld*, to capitalize on the more popular He-Man and She-Ra comics of the 1980s.

adaptation, not the textual report, configures this shift in gendered terms and assumes that the nation's strength depends on the disappearance and silence of its women.⁷¹

In the same way that they imagine women as helpless as a means of asserting a specifically male authority in the face of the attacks, Colón and Jacobson create a version of American technological superiority in opposition to a pre-modern construction of Middle Eastern militarism. Critic Anna Wiederhold calls the representation of Middle Eastern men in the adaptation “visual essentialism”: “the graphic adaptation constructs all Muslims as a violent, extremist Eastern Other against which to define U.S. citizens” (423). Likewise, Bob Britten performs a rhetorical analysis of the text's visuals and finds that “leaders of Western nations and of Muslim extremist movements . . . match up with good and devil [sic] terms, respectively” (365).⁷² But more than simply demonizing the Middle East, as Britten and Wiederhold claim, Colón and Jacobson's Orientalist stereotypes of Middle Eastern militarism become the negative term against which the United States' superior military and industrial technologies are constructed and defined.

In the adaptation, Middle Eastern men⁷³ appear either as devious animals that

⁷¹ I will discuss Anna Wiederhold's essay, “*The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation: Making Meaning in the Gutter Spaces between Word, Image, and Ideology*,” further later on, but here I note that she likewise identifies Colón and Jacobson's reliance on gender stereotypes (431-34), though she does not tie this reliance to exceptionalist thinking. Additionally, she notes that Middle Eastern women are almost completely absent from the adaptation. When they do appear (twice), they are either subservient or exoticized, which, according to Wiederhold, are the only two roles stereotypically available to Middle Eastern women (432).

⁷² A note on Britten's essay: He claims that the Commission itself released the graphic version of the report; this is inaccurate. While Kean provides a foreword for the adaptation, which could be read as authorization or endorsement, neither the government nor the Commission played a role in the inception and creation of the graphic adaptation. Rather, Colón and Jacobson admit that they wanted to write the adaptation because *The 9/11 Report* is in the public domain and so the writers and publishers would not have to pay for copyright clearance.

⁷³ I choose to use the term “Middle Eastern” here, as opposed to Muslim or Arab, first because it seems the most accurate and value-neutral of the choices and also because the stereotypes used to depict al Qaeda members have come to dominate images of Middle Eastern men since 9/11 (i.e. all Middle Eastern men regardless of religion, language, or national origin are considered terrorists until proven otherwise). In general I avoid using the word “terrorist” because it is so intensely loaded. I use “hijackers” when

pose threats of physical and sexual violence or as wily conspirators working to undermine the nation. Precisely because the nation's women appear helpless and vulnerable (a necessary construction so that the nation's men can save them), the hijackers, and indeed all of the Middle Eastern men depicted in the adaptation, become the locus of the threat to the nation's women. Colón depicts the hijackers as dark-haired, leering, sneaking predators in the presence of women and brutal and animalistic attackers in the presence of men. Other than in the mug shot drawings, which graphically reproduce the ID photos first released after the attacks (4), the 19 hijackers rarely appear facing forward or making eye contact with each other or with the Americans who surround them. Instead, their eyes dart to the side as they pass through airport security (5), or they glare angrily in the midst of the attack, teeth bared (16). Notably, they almost always attack from behind and stab their victims in the back. While this is in part a necessary detail (some of the attacks on passengers were surprise attacks, according to the textual report), it also lends the hijackers an air of duplicitousness, suggesting that they are incapable of meeting their opponents "head on," like men.⁷⁴

Colón thus draws on two available stereotypes for the depiction of Middle Eastern men - evil conspirator and dull animal - that go on to control the rest of the adaptation's depictions. In Chapter 5, "Al Qaeda Aims at the American Homeland," Colón shows Hazmi and Mihdhar arriving in Los Angeles in January of 2000. The two men exchange conspiratorial looks in anticipation of the attack they will carry out almost two years later (56). Meanwhile, Mohammed Atta retains his sideways-looking glance while Ramzi

appropriate but default to "Middle Easterner" when discussing the wider range of al Qaeda activities covered in the reports.

⁷⁴ Additionally Colón seems to be utilizing Christian imagery here: the hijackers are "Judas" figures who live among Americans and use American goods and technology only to betray the nation in which they operate.

Binalshibh appears buffoonish, with sloping, glazed eyes and a mouth slightly agape (57). Colón has claimed that he attempted to maintain neutrality in his portrayal of U.S. officials, even to the point of looking for more flattering photos of Dick Cheney, but in the case of Binalshibh, he has chosen for his model the most dull-looking photo available.⁷⁵ In the “Final Strategies and Tactics” section, which traces the months leading up to September 11th, Atta and his fellow pilots appear flying small planes and obtaining pilots’ licenses while the rest of the hijackers lift weights (74). In a particularly brutish moment, Colón draws several of the men training to kill passengers by practicing their knife-work on sheep (73).⁷⁶ In the adaptation, Middle Eastern masculinity equates to sly conspirator or violent savage; no alternative exists.⁷⁷

The adaptation’s depiction of Afghanistan also works to support the image of the savage by emphasizing the forbidding, undeveloped landscapes in which this version of Middle Eastern masculinity supposedly develops. For example, a drawing of bin Laden shows him climbing over rocks, a walking stick in hand, surrounded by men with machine guns (45). Notably his companion, dressed like bin Laden in a robe and scarves, also wears Adidas sneakers and a wristwatch. This subtle nod to the ways in which bin

⁷⁵ An image search for Ramzi Binalshibh immediately returns the photo from which Colón worked, alongside other photos in which Binalshibh appears, frankly, more normal. This is not to say that Colón’s bias is not understandable, but his choice to depict Binalshibh as buffoonish even though other photos from which to work were available stands against his claims of neutrality.

⁷⁶ The text from the Commission’s report specifies that the hijackers practiced on camels and sheep. While Colón quotes this text he shows only the sheep, thus creating the sense that the West stands as a Christian lamb about to be slaughtered.

⁷⁷ Though I do not explore it fully here, there certainly exists a feminization of the conspirator as well, creating a dynamic in which the feminine conspirator/masculine attacker go to battle with the masculine U.S. first responders (whose goal it is to protect the nation’s women). The feminization of the conspirator is necessary to undermine that conspirator’s strength. That is, al Qaeda bested the United States by planning a sneak attack, but in its very duplicitousness, the sneak attack is less powerful. The nation’s technological superiority is also a tribute to its masculinity: in a “fair fight” of technologies versus technologies rather than in an act of asymmetric warfare, the United States would undoubtedly win. (This national narrative of course fails to account for the work of drones, bunker busters, and nighttime air raids on civilian compounds.)

Laden and his associates appropriated bits and pieces of Western dress and mannerisms references al Qaeda's eventual appropriation of commercial jetliners. Despite these small details, however, the page as a whole contrasts the vast landscapes of Afghanistan with the "civilized" territories of the United States: Colón inserts a frame of CIA officials examining a large computerized map of the Middle East on top of the image of bin Laden climbing over rocks. The frame covers the bodies of three of the men traveling with bin Laden, revealing only their heads and the tips of their machine guns. This frame serves at once to declare that the U.S. possesses tremendous knowledge of the Middle East and to contrast the advanced nature of that knowledge - it is both computerized and totalizing - with bin Laden's more primitive knowledge (i.e. he travels on foot with a walking stick). Rarely does Colón draw Afghanistan as anything more than a pile of rocks; in general, the Middle East is reduced to a formless landscape, but for the occasional (dark, dirty) interior of a home (38, 73). Nearly all of the action that takes place in the Middle East takes place outside, again suggesting that the uncivilized Middle East produces men who do nothing more but subsist in the wilderness like animals.⁷⁸

The graphic adaptation easily and expectedly slots Middle Eastern men into readily available criminal mastermind/strongman roles and implicitly ties the "natural" development of these character traits to the landscapes of their homelands. As such the depiction of al Qaeda activity in the Middle East especially emphasizes the use of primitive weapons and related technologies. Chapter 2, "The Foundation of the New

⁷⁸ Saudi Arabia does make one brief appearance, but it is represented as a mosque (72). Al Qaeda operatives in African nations such as Somalia are also depicted; these nations and their people share in Afghanistan's characterization. For example, two Somali men are shown jeering at the crash of the American Black Hawk helicopter (109). They thrust their arms and machine guns in the air, and their bright white teeth flash against their darker skin. This is perhaps one of the more glaring racial depictions in the text; the text's depictions of African Americans (other than Rice and Colin Powell) are rare but unremarkable.

Terrorism,” places Middle Eastern men on their home territory, wearing more traditional clothes (robes, head wraps and scarves) and almost always in the presence of or carrying weaponry. Bin Laden appears first and is comparatively unremarkable: Colón draws him in his iconic white keffiyeh,⁷⁹ his finger pointed in the air in a lecturing stance and his eyes looking slightly to the left margin of the page (30). Ironically, bin Laden becomes the graphic adaptation’s least demonized opposition figure; when tasked with representing a specific, well-known Middle Eastern man, Colón capably draws him relatively neutrally.⁸⁰ Throughout the adaptation (63, 65, 72) bin Laden lacks the glares, leers, and bared teeth that have come to characterize the hijackers whose work he oversees.

This somewhat positive depiction of bin Laden aside, however, Colón chooses to highlight a primitive form of militarism that survives despite the fact that the Afghans receive sophisticated armaments from the United States and other allies throughout the conflict with the Soviet Union (33). In fact, the very first Afghans the reader sees appear in a group of three militants fighting against a larger group of Soviet soldiers in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In this instance, the militants in fact carry the same weapons as the Russians and are shown killing a tank gunner. Yet Afghan men are drawn

⁷⁹ The scarf Bin Laden wears has been called a keffiyeh, ghutra, shemagh, and sufra in various places, and I have been unable to trace down the correct term for his particular national origin, assuming there is one. Turban is often used but seems not accurate enough. I default to “keffiyeh” for several reasons: this term is common in the United States (shemagh is more common in British usage); keffiyeh is generally used to refer to the scarf when it is employed in solidarity movements, and Bin Laden certainly saw himself in solidarity with Muslims around the world; and keffiyeh is used more generally in military contexts, which again applies to Bin Laden’s self-construction as a military leader.

⁸⁰ Colón even manages not to emphasize Bin Laden’s full lips, a graphic interpretation made by many cartoonists following the attacks meant to feminize Middle Eastern men in general and Bin Laden in particular. For a discussion of Bin Laden as satanic figure, see Bahaa-Eddin M. Mazid’s “Cowboy and Misanthrope: A Critical (Discourse) Analysis of Bush and Bin Laden Cartoons.” Among other observations, Mazid notes that in the majority of portrayals, “[Bin Laden] is not merely evil (adj.); he is evil (n.)” (444). Colón does not participate in this portrayal.

at roughly a third of the scale of the Russians and are confined to a frame that spans less than a quarter of the page (31). This attempt to literally marginalize the Middle Eastern figure continues on the next page, where a large group of men with the caption “Young Muslims from around the world came to Afghanistan to join a jihad” (32) is confined to an eighth of the page. Yet the small frame does not contain the menacing power of the image: the men shout, jeer, and thrust their fists and pistols in the air. In each frame of these depictions of the early development of al Qaeda, the men consistently appear with either guns or knives (33, 34, 36, 38). Nowhere in Chapter 2 does an Afghan man appear without some sort of weapon. According to Wiederhold, “verbal descriptions of Islam are situated within the visual context of militarized settings . . . allowing images of weapons such as grenade launchers to stand in as metonymic representations of Islamic extremism later in the text” (424). Colón depicts the Afghan men as militaristic without question.

While large-scale weapons are certainly visible throughout the adaptation, knives come to dominate images of Middle Eastern warfare. The Middle Eastern man, a stereotype of long knives and menacing grins, wields pre-modern weapons as a natural extension of his animal self. For example, in the depiction of an April 1988 battle that ended in the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan, a man is shown rushing on foot toward a Russian tank, holding a machine gun in one hand and a scimitar in the other (34). While the better-armed Soviet forces sensibly retreat, the Afghans move forward in wild pursuit, scrambling over rocks in soft shoes and sandals that complement their robes and turbans, while the Soviets (who carry the very same machine guns the Afghans use) appear in typical military dress (helmets, vests, boots). In the depiction of ongoing tensions between the Taliban and Afghanistan’s Northern Alliance, men wearing sandals and

brandishing long knives go to battle with each other as frightened women flee or fall to the ground (51). Despite being armed with modern American weapons, the Afghans of Colón's depictions prefer the hand-to-hand combat of the knife fight. They appear animalistic in their brutal assault on each other and on their own women, a stark contrast to the West's first responders and rescue workers.

Accordingly, the knife thus moves from the realm of the actual to the symbolic, from preferred weapon to a totem representative of a Middle Eastern warring mentality: physically close, thrilling quick, and primitively brutal. In his depictions of the hijackers, Colón emphasizes knives and boxcutters even when this emphasis is neither necessary nor textually appropriate. In an overview of the timeline, which reduces all of the action of the day into a series of pictures against a stark black background,⁸¹ the hijackers are represented by a boxcutter and the United States by an airplane (20-21). In each frame depicting the hijacking, a knife or boxcutter appears (7, 9, 10, 12, 14) in order to emphasize the simplistic nature of Al Qaeda's weaponry. Likewise, even the depiction of the planning of the attacks is dominated by boxcutters. To accompany the quote, "Atta and Binalshibh discussed how the best time to storm the cockpit would be 10-15 minutes after take off when the cockpit doors were typically opened for the first time" (76), Colón depicts one hijacker seated on the plane, his boxcutter raised in anticipation, while another holds up his hand in a motion to wait. A few frames later, boxcutters accompany the text describing the chosen date for the attacks and the phrase "19 hijackers left their hotel and motel rooms" (77). *The 9/11 Report* makes no mention of weaponry in this particular instance, but the adaptation chooses to emphasize the boxcutters as a means of

⁸¹ To be clear, Colón draws a lengthy timeline (2-19) that then ends with a 6-page overview (20-25) of key moments on the timeline: take-off (depicted as a plane), loss of communication with the flight (a blue bolt of static crossed out with a red line), hijacking (boxcutter), and crash (red eight-pointed star).

linking together the Eastern attacker and his primitive weapon of choice: the scimitars, long-handled knives and swords of Afghanistan transform into boxcutters in an American context. Colón and Jacobson thus work to create a consistent image of the Middle Eastern man, whether hijacker, al Qaeda member, or innocent bystander: he tends toward duplicitousness, a seemingly inevitable fact of his physiognomy; he occupies an undeveloped wasteland; and he favors the primitive weapons and fighting techniques appropriate to his homeland.

The construction of the primitive terrorist allows Colón and Jacobson to reassert the United States' technological superiority by suggesting that, despite their ability to appropriate Western technologies, the Middle Easterner remains an Other, lesser foe whose ability to attack the West is strictly limited to the opportunities the West unwittingly makes available.⁸² That is, in the same way that the U.S. arms Afghanistan with advanced weaponry in the 1980s, the U.S. provides the technology that its attackers require to succeed; the attackers themselves come armed only with the same blades they have relied on for centuries. The graphic adaptation represents the knowledge and abilities of al Qaeda as static. While the United States maintains the resources and capabilities to respond to threats, thereby growing stronger, the Middle Eastern threat exists as a timeless, changeless force of evil. In a series of images in Chapters 11 ("Foresight - And Hindsight") and 12 ("What to Do? A Global Strategy"), al Qaeda appears as it has throughout the adaptation: small groups of conspirators sit together outdoors, rifles in hand (109, 111, 114); single terrorist-figures leer directly at the reader (115); and larger groups of bearded men in traditional dress thrust their fists in their air,

⁸² To some degree this reading clarifies but does not justify the adaptation's reliance on racial and cultural stereotypes; the attackers must be duplicitous in order for the United States to appear more honorable and, further, their power stems from this lack of honor rather than some essential greatness or rightness.

their chests draped with weapons and their mouths open, shouting (117). Meanwhile, the United States is shown meeting and overcoming this static threat in both traditional and innovative ways. Jetfighters, CIA agents, and government officials appear superimposed over a map of Afghanistan,⁸³ suggesting mastery of the territory (110). Various traditional military interventions occur, resulting in a clear American occupation of the very same caves and hills once occupied by Afghan men (114 [Afghan men in cave], 119 [American military in same cave]). On each page, a visually familiar threat is quashed by American military intervention.

In contrast to this depiction of a knowable, containable threat, the official textual report warns, “National security used to be considered by . . . measuring industrial might. To be dangerous, an enemy had to muster large armies. Threats emerged slowly, often visibly. . . . Now threats can emerge quickly. An organization like al Qaeda, headquartered in a country on the other side of the earth, in a region so poor that electricity or telephones were scarce, could nonetheless scheme to wield weapons of unprecedented destructive power. . . . In this sense, 9/11 has taught us that . . . the enemy is not just ‘terrorism,’ some generic evil” (362). Here the Commission reasserts its point that al Qaeda poses a changing and powerful threat despite its technological shortcomings. Yet the graphic adaptation maintains that the United States’ superior technology, in particular its powers of surveillance, are enough to meet this threat. While the text of the report (quoted in the adaptation) speaks in terms of recommendations and possibilities for changes the government ought to make to its existing counterterrorism

⁸³ The mastery of maps holds special significance in the collection. Middle Eastern men often appear poring over small, handheld maps, their faces pained and confused (56, 60). But U.S. officials always appear in front of large, often computerized maps, suggesting a totalizing knowledge of the Middle East (64, 81, 103, 105).

measures, the adaptation depicts these recommendations as if they are already successfully in place. For example, in a section on border control, the quoted textual report reads, “The commission recommends that the U.S. border security system be integrated into a larger network of screening points” (121). But, in the accompanying image, one agent says, “I just sent the info to the CIA,” to which his partner responds, “Bingo! We’ve got a sure terrorist here!” (121). On the following page, a border agent says, “We can’t let you through with this, sir. It’s not genuine” (122). Together, the images in this section depict a smoothly operating system of surveillance that does not yet exist. Within the bounds of the adaptation, these images function as an assertion of the nation’s claim to technological supremacy over its unchanging, unevolving enemies.

By consistently presenting Middle Eastern men as primitive, *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* creates a characterization that lacks the nuance of the textual report. In his study of graphic journalism and the graphic novel *Borderlands*, Todd Schack claims that graphic media create “the reading experience as a slower, more demanding involvement with the text as one is challenged to examine both text and images” (112).⁸⁴ In Chapter Three I make a similar argument in my discussion of Foer’s use of visuals in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*: the text’s visuals function as an invitation to the reader to slow down, consider, and *see*. Schack insists that visuals “demand that we take time to realize - and to feel” (116). Further, Schack claims that such slow consideration characterizes the reading experience of most graphic journalism. The interplay of word and image allows the reader to “question ideological assumptions” present in the text (Schack 113), a claim echoed in Wiederhold’s reading of *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic*

⁸⁴ Chute makes a similar argument, writing, “graphic narrative . . . can require slowing down; the form can place a great demand on our cognitive skills” (460).

Adaptation: “[G]raphic adaptations draw special attention to the processes of selection and representation present in all nonfiction work, which are, after all, adaptations themselves. [...] Graphic adaptation . . . presents readers with persistent reminders of the fictive and rhetorical organization of all historical texts” (434).

In contrast, I would argue that the images of Colón’s adaptation work to shut down interrogation rather than invite it. The images Schack discusses in *Borderlands*⁸⁵ require more of the reader than do Colón’s images, which simplify rather than complicate the textual report. This is not to say that the reader of the adaptation is somehow fooled into accepting Colón and Jacobson’s interpretation of the event; indeed, the average reader would likely notice how the text functions as a traditional superhero comic in its plain rendering of the attacks in terms of good versus evil.⁸⁶ Colón and Jacobson intend their adaptation to stand as a simplification of the textual *9/11 Report*, a quickly read and apprehended account of the Commission’s lengthy and more nuanced findings. The authors choose the readily available shortcuts of exceptionalist thinking as a means of interpreting, not merely re-presenting, the findings of the 9/11 Commission, a choice that impacts both the text’s readability and the reader’s understanding of the event.

“At a glance . . . all the facts”: The Exceptional Knowability of 9/11

The above discussion of gender, technology, and exceptionalism explores the ideological standpoint that informs the creation of the graphic *9/11 Report*. Yet this discussion neglects what Colón and Jacobson along with their critics consider the greatest accomplishment of the adaptation: the formal element of the timeline. As mentioned

⁸⁵ This point extends to the visuals Foer chooses as well (see Chapter Three).

⁸⁶ See Britten for an extensive discussion of the text’s use of “good and devil [Britten uses the term ‘devil’ not ‘evil’]” visual terminology.

above, the authors have stated that they created the graphic adaptation because they are “in the business of clarifying things” (“The Trouble with Drawing Dick Cheney”). According to Colón, the chronology of the attacks, from the take-off of the first plane to the crash of the last, poses the greatest difficulty to one’s understanding of the event. He explains, “I had been trying to read *The 9/11 Commission Report* and found it tough going. I got confused with the names, places, events, what times planes took off” (“The Trouble”). Reviewers likewise have noted the usefulness of the timeline in representing four simultaneous and interlinked events. Peter Hartlaub claims, “[T]he comic stacks the events on top of one another to simulate real time -- making it jarringly clear, for example, that United Flight 93 took off from the airport 23 minutes after a flight attendant on American Flight 11 notified American Airlines of the hijacking on that plane” (“Sept. 11 Commission Report Takes Comic Books to the Next Level”). Likewise, Neal Conan notes, “[F]ollowing [the planes] as they're stripped across the page, horizontally . . . was much more effective than reading the description of it in any number of books, including the 9/11 Commission Report” (“The Sept. 11 Commission Report”). Notably, the structure of the timeline serves a political purpose, which is, as Jacobson states, “to show that basically the first plane had hit the Trade Center while the fourth plane was just barely off the ground. So you get a sense of here there was such a lack of communication” (“The Sept. 11 Commission Report”). The timeline reiterates a key finding of the Commission: the controllers and officials on the ground had a few opportunities to slow if not fully stop the attacks, but they missed those opportunities.

But, more than simply clarifying the Commission’s findings, the timeline creates the sense that the seemingly unsubsumable, uncontainable events of the day can be both

known and contained precisely by abandoning the attempt to narrativize them. The reviewers who react positively to the Colón/Jacobson timeline, as mentioned above, describe a negative experience with the narrative version that stems from the need to “go back and forth between the events on the four hijacked airplanes” when reading the text (“Sept. 11 Commission Report Takes Comic Books to the Next Level”).⁸⁷ These reviewers object to the sense of confusion generated by the text and prefer the sense of mastery generated by the graphic timeline. Indeed, the timeline clarifies the simultaneous sequences of events on September 11th just as Colón and Jacobson hoped it would. From the first frames of the timeline (which is spread over multiple pages in the soft cover edition but appears as a full page pullout timeline in hardcover), the reader sees where each plane was at 8 AM on September 11th. Flight 11 is shown taking off at 7:59; Flight 175, 77, and 93, meanwhile, remain at their gates. On the next page, a hijacker is already stabbing the pilot of Flight 11 in the back while Flights 175 and 77 have finally taken off. Flight 93, meanwhile, experiences a 42-minute delay. On the next page, Flight 93 takes off at 8:42, four minutes before Flight 11 crashes into the Trade Center but well after the FAA becomes aware of the hijacking.

I narrate the graphic timeline here to underscore the point Colón, Jacobson, and their reviewers make: the graphic chronology, with its stacked timelines showing exactly where each plane is at a given moment far more successfully communicates the events of September 11th than the textual report does. Furthermore, the reader can more easily understand the Commission’s findings related both to what went wrong that day (miscommunication) and what would have to start going right to prevent future attacks

⁸⁷ The fact that many readers access the report online as a PDF potentially complicates the experience of reading. Scrolling back and forth feels even less comfortable than flipping through a physical book (though admittedly the search function available for PDF documents could offset this complication).

(substantiation for the recommendations regarding better interagency and private sector communication and surveillance). The graphic adaptation thus improves upon the text by clarifying these aspects of the report. Yet I wish to return to Hartlaub's notion that the timeline somehow manages to "simulate real time" through its stacking of the four planes' timelines. The simultaneous timelines represent "real" time to the extent that such a simulation is possible (and so far as one considers the strict limitations imposed: only four timelines are included, depicted from the perspective of the planes as opposed to the points of impact, but an infinite combination of timelines and perspectives exists). Four planes were in the air at 8:42 AM; the timeline represents the attack in all its uncontrollable simultaneity. But, at the same time, the timelines provide not a real or faithful representation of the events but rather a hyperreal one: one simply cannot experience the simultaneity of multiple timelines. This is the stuff of science fiction, not narrative nonfiction. The reader can no more be in two places at once than she can be on two pages at once. The flipping back and forth between pages in the textual report, an act reminiscent of flipping between channels in search of more news on the day of the attacks, more accurately represents the process of apprehension: the confused reader must make sense of the information before her in order to bring the attacks to order and meaning. While the experience of viewing the graphic timelines is certainly more comfortable, and even more expedient, the timelines also close down the meaning-making process in which the reader of the textual report must engage.⁸⁸

Ultimately, Colón and Jacobson's desire to create a version of *The 9/11 Report* that would "at a glance, [give the reader] all the facts" ("The Sept. 11 Commission Report as Graphic Novel") represents a fundamentally exceptionalist approach to

⁸⁸ See Chapter 3's discussion of the ethical witness and the necessity of engagement with a difficult text.

September 11th, even more so when one hears Jacobson call the graphic adaptation “a more understandable package” (“The Trouble”). Because Colón and Jacobson consider themselves graphic journalists, it is possible to read their motives as journalistic ones. As critic Beate Josephi explains, journalists have long been considered “watchdog[s] of government,” expected not just to fairly report and disseminate information but also to “provid[e] critical surveillance over those in power” (475). Jacobson and Colón may therefore read themselves in the tradition of reporters on a clarifying mission. Even so, this mission cannot account for the fact that the simultaneous timeline offers the reader nothing less than totalizing knowledge, an experience of possessing all of the facts of the attacks in one easily apprehended “package.” To assert the availability and accessibility of such knowledge likewise asserts a form of narrative exceptionalism: perhaps the nation’s technologies failed to stop the attacks, but some ground is regained in the nation’s ability to control representations of the attacks. Significantly, this experience is not available in the textual report, not simply because it is more difficult to read but also because the authors assert “we do not know” in those moments when their knowledge fails to explain the attacks. The “we do not know” of the textual report resists the construction of an exceptionalist subject position even at those moments when it engages other aspects of exceptionalist discourse related to gender and technology. But for the adaptation, the original text’s hoped-for future is now: the reader already inhabits some idealized world in which “we do not know” has become “we know”: we know what happened before, during, and after 9/11, and the nation has enhanced its surveillance technologies accordingly, resulting in a (comforting, not distressing) sense that the nation knows all and sees all, and so all will be well.

Chapter Three

“Everyone could be safe”: Global Citizenship and the Moral Imagination in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005)

As Chapter One’s discussion of exceptionalism points out, one aspect of the discourse concerns the nation’s scientific prowess and the ways it chooses to yield its attendant technological power: the United States lays claim to exceptional status in part by creating the technologies needed to maintain military and political dominance. Yet a study of exceptionalism also extends to knowledge production, moving from the ways in which the nation invents technologies to prevent attacks to the way it creates and controls knowledge of the attacks themselves. *The 9/11 Report* highlights the government’s inability to stop the attacks, focusing both on specific shreds of evidence that apparently went unheeded and on the surveillance community’s inability to weave this evidence into a prediction of the attacks. The exceptional nation, according to these arguments, ought to have been able to use its military strength to prevent the attack that its surveillance had predicted. In Chapters Three and Four my discussion turns to literary texts that engage questions of the production of knowledge about 9/11, including the assumption that the attacks and their aftermath are inherently knowable and containable.

Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* examines exceptionalism and knowledge production by following a child’s search for the story of the final moments of his father’s life in the Towers, a story that the child, Oskar, believes can and must be known. The events of September 11, 2001, spawned a thousand small-scale detective stories just like Oskar’s. While the FBI “solved” the crime itself within weeks, naming the hijacking suspects on September 14th, confirming their identities by the end of the month, and solidly tracing their connections to Al Qaeda by the end of the

year,⁸⁹ the site of the World Trade Center collapse became the land of the missing. Passenger manifests for the flights and security data from the Pentagon allowed for quicker and easier identification of victims in Shanksville and Washington D.C., but the exact number of persons lost at the WTC site remains a very precise estimate, even twelve years later. From an initial toll based on the Twin Towers' normal daily capacity of tens of thousands, the number of presumed dead and missing persons shrank to roughly 6,700 in the months following the attack before settling finally around 2,750 in November of 2003.⁹⁰ Yet this number alone seems at once too large to bear witness to and too small to encompass the individual stories it represents. While this is certainly true in any event of mass, anonymous death, the need for a precise final death count exists as a uniquely American requirement.⁹¹ As cultural commentator Jesse Green explains, "A paradox of our mostly innumerate society is that we require unreal numbers to make things real. . . . The World Trade Center attacks demanded a different kind of precision. No one could be fractionally dead; no family could be missing an approximate number of loved ones" ("Dead, Accounting of"). The sense that 9/11 deaths require more than just an estimated toll stems from an understanding of what it means to be an American: that

⁸⁹ Al Qaeda was immediately determined to be the organization responsible for the attacks, but the group did not formally claim responsibility, and government agencies took some time to complete their investigation of the funding, planning, and implementation of the attacks.

⁹⁰ As of this writing, the death toll stands at 2,753 for the World Trade Center site. It should be noted that this number only accounts for those persons who were reported missing, and for whom documentation was provided to the City of New York. Even so, that number is expected to slowly grow as deaths from causes directly linked to the attacks occur (e.g. deaths from lung disease due to smoke and debris exposure). See David W. Dunlap, "Sept. 11 Death Toll Rises by One, to 2752," *New York Times* (New York Times, 16 Jan. 2009, Web, 6 Aug. 2013). Other statistics from *New York Magazine's* feature *The Encyclopedia of 9/11*: Jesse Green, "Dead, Accounting of," *New York Magazine*, (New York Media LLC, 5 Sept. 2011, Web, 6 Aug. 2013).

⁹¹ Compare, for example, the use of "the six million" as shorthand for the Holocaust: this number does not precisely account for the Jewish lives lost, nor does it account for the other victims ("countless" victims) of Nazi atrocities. Likewise, terms like "the disappeared" are used in Northern Ireland, South America, and elsewhere to describe victims of nonstate and state political violence. Interestingly, the term "disappeared" sometimes has been used to describe those persons taken away in post-9/11 terror investigations, but the term is not as widely used in the U.S. as it is worldwide.

every life is wanted, meaningful, documented, fulfilling, properly laid to rest at its appropriate end, and excepted from anonymous death, a terribly familiar experience for most of the rest of the world.⁹² In the case of the Twin Towers' collapse, however, exceptionalist thinking could not suspend the reality of a mass casualty event that became all the more inscrutable in its visibility.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close thus takes the WTC deaths as its starting point, attempting to unravel a 9/11 paradox-turned-mystery: how could an event so visible and present in the national consciousness remain unsubsumable and unknowable? That is, how could the nation, already having failed to save the lives of those killed, likewise fail to preserve the stories of each of the lost, to provide, if not a miraculous American rescue, at least a meaningful American death? Nearly every moment of the attacks on New York City was captured on video and in still photography; if anything, the event suffered from hyper-documentation, from a superfluity of images of the burning buildings, the survivors in exodus, and the final moments of the trapped. Refusing that his father could simply be "lost,"—Thomas's body is never found, and the Schell family buries an empty coffin—Foer's child protagonist, Oskar Schell, wades into this mess of data, searching for an exact answer to the question of how his father died. He plainly states, "There were so many different ways to die, and I just need to know which was his" (257). More than anything, Oskar demands and feels entitled to the story of his father's death. By the novel's end, the reader sees that Oskar has known all along how his father died: he possesses a tape of Thomas's last message on the family answering

⁹² As noted in Chapter One, the notion of the United States as an exceptional nation stems in part from the colonization of North America by Europeans. While slaughter certainly occurred on the continent, the Native populations subject to those attacks were excised from the national narrative. It is also important to note that while the WTC death toll represents over one hundred nationalities, the event exists as an act perpetrated against Western culture in general and the United States in particular.

machine, and from the timing of that tape Oskar determines that his father was trapped in the North Tower when it collapsed. Despite physically possessing all of the information he needs to determine the nature of Thomas's death, however, Oskar finds it difficult to look at it. To recover that story, Oskar takes a detective's journey that allows him to organize what he knows about his father into a story about his death. Existing critical discussions of the novel establish its connection to the genre of detective fiction, as well as to epistolary novels and the *bildungsroman*, but here I aim to more fully explore the science of detection.⁹³ Oskar uses the scientific method, a weaving of disjointed facts into an ordered, understandable narrative, as a method of detection. Of particular importance is the method's recursiveness: the scientific method requires a cycling through of its steps as the researcher asks questions, gathers data, refines assumptions, and eventually arrives at a tentative conclusion. Because it allows for the repeated revisiting of a subject within the bounds of rational discourse, the scientific method proves well-suited to the work of narrating a traumatic event. By allowing Oskar to attain a knowable, relatable narrative of Thomas's death, the novel participates in an aspect of exceptionalist discourse: though unpreventable, Thomas's death attains a tentative sense of closure befitting his nationality.

While the novel acknowledges Oskar's need to know what happened to his father as appropriate and understandable, it does not cling to an exceptionalist retelling of September 11th. Like Whitehead, who creates simultaneously invulnerable and dissolvable versions of New York City, Foer tempers the knowability of Thomas's death with a larger acknowledgement of the nation's role in perpetrating the same kinds of

⁹³ See Michael's discussion of the *bildungsroman*, epistolary writing and the detective genre (22-23), Atchison's discussion of epistolary writing (362-63), and Dawes's discussion of *bildungsroman* and the detective genre (529).

events to which Thomas falls victim. As several critics have pointed out, the transhistorical nature of the novel calls into question acts of war waged by the United States by drawing parallels between the bombings of Hiroshima and Dresden and the 9/11 attacks.⁹⁴ Here science and American exceptionalism intersect, as it becomes clear to the reader that the technologies that win the U.S. its exceptional status also render it a terribly deadly enemy. Beyond simply calling into question narratives of “the good war,” *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* undermines post-9/11 narratives regarding the innocence of the United States and its absolute right to defend itself against attacks like those of September 11th. Like Whitehead, Foer moves back and forth between acknowledging the need for a complete version of the attacks and recognizing the danger inherent in such narratives. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* thus focuses on science—the individual method and the larger national project—as the location where exceptionalist discourse can be both built up and torn down.

For Oskar, knowledge of the nation’s role in perpetrating similar acts of war results in the quest to create a redemptive form of scientific practice. Against the imperialist and militarist science driving contemporary research, Oskar imagines a community of scientists consisting of women and disabled men who work to save rather than to take lives. Oskar imagines himself a member of this community, and as such *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* overflows with the unbridled creativity of his inventions. Some are a child’s attempt at humor, but quite a few others represent Oskar’s attempt to create a means by which his father could have been saved. Perhaps the most noted of these inventions encompasses the novel’s ending: a flip book in which a falling man moves backwards, rising up from his presumed death to the imagined safety of the

⁹⁴ See Saal, p. 463-67; Mullins, p. 318-23; Hornung, p. 171-73, 176-79; and Dawes, p. 522, 529, 539-40.

Towers. Because this ending can be read as Foer's retreat into an exceptionalist dream that would cast 9/11 as especially deserving of such a reversal and thus of salvation, the final section of the chapter considers those claims of exceptionalism in light of a reading of the text as a detective story. The detective mode gestures toward what it means to truly see, or more accurately, to witness: not to gloss over items and images carelessly, but to carefully look, to spend time watching. While the flipbook, as well as the novel's other images, can certainly be read as postmodern trickery, it is more productive to view them as a call to the reader not to move too quickly and instead to slow down and *look*, not just to absorb text on the page but to sit with the silences of the text's blank and overwritten pages. Precisely because 9/11 is a media event characterized by an overwhelming amount of images, Foer's choice to include those same images in the novel becomes an attempt to help the reader learn how to witness, rather than merely to spectate, 9/11. In the same way that a detective novel consists of the story of a crime nestled within the story of the investigation, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* simultaneously acts as a working through of trauma for Oskar and a reflection on the ethics of witness for the reader.

Part One of this chapter provides an overview of existing scholarship on detective fiction before examining how the scientific method provides a framework for the working through of trauma. By recovering his knowledge of Thomas's death—indeed, by experiencing Thomas's death as knowable and sayable—Oskar achieves a very tentative closure. Part Two delves further into the construction of Oskar as scientist in order to examine the ways in which he sees himself working in and against a troubling scientific tradition. Though Oskar occasionally fantasizes about physical violence and revenge, he otherwise exhibits a particularly moral imagination. His many inventions gesture toward

what an ethical scientific practice, one that would do no harm, might look like, even as he recognizes his own nation's acts of war (Dresden, Hiroshima) that are at best morally questionable. While this focus on humane uses of technology works against the exceptionalist discourse that would portray 9/11 as a singular event, the flipbook finale, which imagines a world in which 9/11 never happened, can be read as a reiteration of the same exceptionalist thinking it resists. The flipbook certainly allows Oskar to tell a story in which the fantastical inventions he imagines could have saved his father, but the novel's visuals as a whole assert that the instability of a traumatic event always threatens the coherence of such narratives. Part Three thus examines how the visuals, by disrupting the novel's march toward a coherent story of Thomas's death, resist exceptionalist discourse by reminding the reader that any experience of closure is always tentative.

Part One: The Science of Detection *Features of the Detective Story*

Despite its solid status as genre fiction, the detective story has garnered serious critical attention at least since the postwar university era.⁹⁵ Studies such as John Robert Moore's "Sherlock Holmes Borrows a Plot" (1947), for example, examine Conan Doyle's experience of authorship at the intersection of genre and literary fiction and cite "the most exacting readership which has shaped the career of any writer" (85) as the impetus for the easily discernible patterns of the genre. While Conan Doyle does not "invent" detective fiction (that title would go to Edgar Allan Poe or Émile Gaboriau,

⁹⁵ Compared, for example, to the romance novel genre, which did not receive the same kind of critical attention until at least the 1980s, mainly because their audience was and remains primarily working class and female. It seems plausible that the negative reviews of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* stem at least in part from the novel's association with the detective genre (i.e. when critics denigrate Foer's "toolbox" of visual images and blank pages, they might in part be reacting to the toolbox of genre fiction, too).

while Wilkie Collins solidifies the tradition), he contributes to detective fiction's repeatability by meeting the demands of that "exacting readership." J.K. Van Dover's *We Must Have Certainty: Four Essays on the Detective Story* (2005) delineates the evolution of the detective story from the classical or golden era, through the "hardboiled" American iterations of the interwar period, and on to hybrid contemporary forms of detective stories. While Foer's novel seems at times to be a hybrid of the different generations of the detective form, I focus here on the relevant qualities of the classic detective that seem to most clearly influence Oskar: the detective's intelligence, his incorporation of the scientific method into the process of detection, his expression of the urban experience, and his relationship to his community.

The stock character of the detective exhibits uncommon intelligence and a gift for finding meaning where others might miss it. As Van Dover explains, he "is an eccentric individual with an extraordinary intellect; confronted with a baffling crime, he thinks his way to an infallible reconstruction of actual events. . . . The mystery/detective story presents an intense fable of the power of an uncommon man" (26). The detective uses this uncommon intelligence to become a scientist of the everyday world; as Van Dover notes, while it appears that the detective possesses superhuman intelligence, he in fact possesses a superior method (26). According to critic Joseph Agassi, the detective's method stems directly from the scientific method, which posits that "research should consist in the patient gathering of masses of details and their repeated examination until, perhaps with the aid of a systematic elimination of false possibilities, facts fall into a pattern by themselves, until the pattern or law of nature clicks, as it were" (101). As Martin A. Kayman explains, the detective is created as a type of a scientist because the

late 19th century saw “the emergence of the intellectual professions as new repositories of social power”: “The principle alternative to the intellectual as pure thinker is the trained scientist, employing not only the power of rational thought but that of specialised knowledge and, most of all, of scientific instruments” (46, 47). Readers thus see the detective as a new brand of intellectual hero who “studies scientifically, conducts experiments, and accumulates knowledge,” allowing the reader to “feel part of a modern scientific world” (49-50).

In addition to this incorporation of the new professions, detective fiction also highlights the modern urban experience. Laura Marcus cites G.K. Chesterton’s assertion that “[t]he first essential value of the detective story lies in this, that it is the earliest and only form of popular literature in which is expressed some sense of the poetry of modern life” (248). As Chesterton notes and Marcus goes on to explain, the detective spends his time on the ground, walking the city and readings its “urban hieroglyphics” (248). In the detective’s quest to restore order to the world, he also uncovers a “hidden history” of “violent crimes which, leaving their mark on both place and history, are at one and the same time repetitions and repressions” (248). The clear patterns of crime, detection, and solution that comprise detective stories thus lend a naturalness to the notion that every crime, though a mystery, can be solved. The detective goes out in the world, gathers every available clue, and repeatedly examines those clues, placing them in various relationships to each other until he unlocks the puzzle and can relate to a fascinated audience the story that they tell. But Agassi also notes that, precisely because this “systematic, thorough, all-encompassing search” (108) is performed by a human, it suffers from human faults: “In a detective, spy or suspense novel it often turns out that

the hero had a valuable clue at hand from the very start of his research, but was ignorant as to the value of the clue and thus neglected it, to his great, perhaps almost total, loss. This is the reason why the detective collects as much information as he can and then surveys it over and over since there is no knowing what might be the telling clue” (100). If anything can be a clue, then everything can be a clue; the scientific method is inherently fallible and so must be utterly obsessive in order to be successful.

The obsessive nature of research lends the detective an air of strangeness, placing him at once central to and yet on the edge of society. In short, the world needs its detectives at the level of story to achieve justice for the wronged and on a metaphysical level to prove that such wrongs will always be righted. According to Kayman, the genre “celebrate[s] the capacity of rationalism to organise the material of existence meaningfully, and the power of the rational individual to protect us from semiotic and moral chaos” (48). Likewise, Van Dover notes that this “reordering” impulse serves to reassure readers that “The world . . . was essentially a well-ordered place whose decency had been violated.... Crime was an anomaly, and by correctly tracing the anomalous evidence that the anomalous deed had left behind, the detective could apprehend the perpetrator and erase the disruption” (23). Of course, this seems a simplistic (and, in terms of this study, exceptionalist) notion that a damaged world might be so easily fixed, but, as Van Dover and others note, readers want what they want and, in this case, they desire “an engaging, sophisticated escape into a superficially disordered, always re-orderable world” as a means of countering “the profound and irremediable barbarisms of the First World War” (38). According to Peter Hühn, the restoration of order in detective fiction encodes an entire system of middle class values designed to “reaffirm the validity

of the system of norms”: “the private detective, by successfully uncovering the criminal, demonstrates the efficacy of one central class-value—bourgeois individualism—and thus confirms the ability of the social system to preserve itself. The latent anxieties of the middle-class readers about the stability of their society are thereby alleviated” (453). Furthermore, that class of readers assures itself of its own safety within the system of order, since “the legal requirement of rational, verifiable proof of guilt before the conviction of any criminal . . . indicates the advocacy of democratic principles as the central meaning of the genre” (453). In this reading of detective fiction, the desire for order represents a desire for the reiteration of central societal values challenged by incursions of the “criminal element.”⁹⁶

Contemporary Detective Stories and the Trauma Narrative

While the features of the classic detective story detailed above certainly influence Foer’s depiction of Oskar, a reading of a contemporary work of detective fiction enables a discussion of the ways in which the genre has gradually changed to accommodate the “fractured world” sensibility that characterizes post-World War II literary fiction.

Specifically, while Foer incorporates many of the tropes of the pre-World War II detective—intelligence, urban experience, community—into the writing of Oskar, Oskar

⁹⁶ As I will explore further in Part Three, critics of Foer’s foray into genre fiction enact this charge when they claim that the novel supports an exceptionalist “solution” to the crimes of 9/11. Based in part on these claims that it works too hard to restore an order that ought instead to be questioned, detective fiction certainly has its detractors, but more recent studies such as Tzvetan Todorov’s “The Typology of Detective Fiction” suggest that the genre does a bit more than reiterate social norms and values. Todorov argues that detective stories exhibit a structural complexity wherein “the first [story]—the story of the crime—tells ‘what really happened,’ whereas the second—the story of the investigation—explains ‘how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it.’ . . . The first notion corresponds to the reality evoked, to events similar to those which take place in our lives; the second, to the book itself, to the narrative, to the literary devices the author employs” (123). Todorov thus claims that the structure of the detective story, far from merely reinforcing the status quo, actually helps reveal the relationship between “real life” and the stories told about it.

experiences a distinctly postwar event of non-state violence. As such he shares with Linus, the protagonist of Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution: A Story of Detection* (2004), the experience of having survived a seemingly senseless act of violence against a civilian population. *The Final Solution* revives a long-retired elderly detective, meant to be read as Sherlock Holmes, and places him on the outskirts of London in 1944, where he is drawn into one final mystery. An orphaned child refugee from Germany, Linus Steinman, has been saved from deportation and sent to live in Holmes' village. The child's only companion is an African grey parrot known for the seemingly random string of German numbers he recites. The child, however, is mute and has not spoken since being forcibly separated from his parents. The village is captivated by the parrot, which goes missing at the same time that one of the boarders from the house where Linus is staying has been killed. Holmes is called in from retirement to help solve the case, but he refuses, saying that he will only help find the bird.

In some ways, Chabon's tale, especially when compared with Foer's, is relatively straightforward, and Holmes remains the same character he was when Doyle was writing in the classical era. Of Holmes' powers of detection, Chabon writes, "A delicate, inexorable lattice of inferences began to assemble themselves, like a crystal, in the old man's mind, shivering, catching the light in glints and surmises. It was the deepest pleasure life could afford, this deductive crystallization, this paroxysm of guesswork" (61). In his efforts to find the bird, Holmes employs the same techniques of deduction that always served him well, and he does indeed manage to track down the parrot. However, while Holmes succeeds in solving the mystery, Chabon makes it clear that the detective, like the empire he once represented, is in decline: "Over his bearing, his

speech, the tweed suit and tatterdemalion Inverness there hung, like the odor of Turkish shag, all the vanished vigor and rectitude of the Empire” (50). Holmes clearly serves as a relic of the London that once was. Meanwhile, when he visits the London of 1944, he expects to find a city as tattered as he is, struggling to regain its composure after the Blitz: “[he] *anticipated*, simply out of a kind of, well, let us be charitable and term it a “scientific curiosity,” you know, the sight of this great city lying in smoking ashes along the Thames” (100). Instead, he finds a city revived by an influx of Americans and Americanness: “They had bombed it; they had burned it; but they had not killed it, and now it was sending forth growths and tendrils of some strange new life. . . . American military vehicles in the streets, American films in the cinemas, and an atmosphere of loud, raffish swagger . . . a cacophony of sprung vowels” (100). Holmes no longer has a place in London, it would seem, because London is no longer British. Hence, while Holmes can still solve a small mystery, Chabon’s detective story does not restore the world to order in the same way Doyle once did.

While Chabon’s Holmes expects to see London in ruins and is surprised instead to find it remaking itself in the image of the Americans who have laid siege in a different way, he does not anticipate, nor does he try to determine, the meaning behind the parrot’s German numbers, a meaning that would have fractured Holmes’ worldview more than the threat of the Blitz. As Stefs Craps and Gert Buelens point out, *The Final Solution* “is less a detective story than an elegy for the detective story, a mournful reflection on the loss of the rational and moral order of the world” (“Traumatic” 572).⁹⁷ In refusing to

⁹⁷ Craps and Buelens later go on to sharpen this point, writing, “In our reading, then, *The Final Solution* is not so much a parable about the loss of a rational and moral world brought about by the Holocaust as a complex, multilayered text that contextualizes the Holocaust within a broader history of European imperialism and colonialism” (“Traumatic” 583). I will return to their criticism later in my discussion of

figure out the meaning of the parrot's numbers, Holmes also resists the disruptive knowledge those numbers contain, though the reader suspects that the numbers might have to do with the record-keeping of the concentration camps and later learns they refer to trains that took Linus's parents away. The text mourns the loss of the order of the world, as Craps and Buelens suggest, by gesturing toward an event that denies the bounds of rational thought. Holmes states, "I doubt very much . . . if we shall ever learn what significance, if any, those numbers may hold" (129). Linus, of course, knows what the numbers mean, but that meaning remains, for the time of the story, locked within his silence.⁹⁸ While, as I discuss below, certain aspects of the detective genre make it especially suited to the communication of a traumatic narrative, the bounds of Chabon's classic detective story prevent it from engaging the trauma behind Linus's silence. In order to solve the mystery of the numbers for the reader (but not the character), Chabon resorts to devoting one chapter to the "voice" of the parrot, who calls the numbers "the train song, the song of the rolling cars" (115). To communicate this knowledge of the Holocaust, then, Chabon must break the bounds of the traditional detective story. And even Holmes seems to know what he cannot quite yet know, "That it was the insoluble problems—the false leads and the cold cases—that reflected the true nature of things. That all the apparent significance and pattern had no more intrinsic sense than the chatter of an African gray parrot" (129-131). By the end of the story, Holmes has run up against the limits of his powers of deduction. While he can still restore a parrot to a child, he

Foer's grouping-together of Dresden, Hiroshima, and New York City, but in general, they make the case for "comparative genocide studies": "The critical narrative of modernity that can be inferred from the host of mirroring effects between the Holocaust and non-European histories of victimization set up in Chabon's novella suggests a measure of continuity rather than absolute discontinuity between the Holocaust and other modern atrocities" (581). Foer does the same when, against a nationalist and exceptionalist discourse, he draws comparisons between cities destroyed by violent acts of war.

⁹⁸ Linus begins to speak at the very end of the story, but his only words are a repetition of the bird's string of numbers.

cannot make sense of an event that is inherently incomprehensible. *The Final Solution* thus tells a traditional tale of detection but points to the fact that the Holocaust, theorized as a tear in the fabric of the world that cannot be mended, defies narrativization.

Besides pointing out the limits of the detective form, Chabon's story provides a segue into a discussion of the relationship between the detective novel and trauma narratives. As stated above the process of detection essentially follows the process of the scientific method. However, while the method itself linearly moves from problem to solution, it is also characterized by its recursiveness. That is, rather than each step being a checkpoint that one passes through and leaves behind, each step requires revisiting in order to achieve refinement. For example, a hypothesis, once tested, might prove the need for further experimentation, followed by a revision of the hypothesis, and so on. Good science, as Thomas Nickles explains, is a repetitive practice both immediately (within a study) and over time (as new studies influence the old): "science is better regarded as an ongoing, multi-pass, self-correcting enterprise in which scientists cycle back to refine previous results, investing them with greater theoretical and experimental richness" (Nickles 443). Similarly, Barry Gower notes, "Experiments are not simple events with clear beginnings and ends; they are human interventions in a world of numerous conflicting influences and forces, and have their origins in earlier related investigations and their termination in later explorations" (18). Both Nickles and Gower point to the fact that the scientific method, while a means of moving from question to answer, from point A to point B, also accommodates the complexity of difficult questions by allowing for the repeated review of new and old information. The scientific method lends itself to the project of meaning-making in a traumatic narrative by enabling a methodical working

through and slow piecing together of the pieces of a difficult story. In the reading of Foer's novel that follows, I use the above discussion of the detective novel to discuss the figure of Oskar as a scientist-detective. Following the scientific method, Oskar manages to piece together a story of his father's death, a seemingly impossible achievement that can be read as symptomatic of an exceptionalist desire to make meaning of the senselessness of the 9/11 attacks. This groundwork will allow for further consideration of the text's positioning vis-à-vis exceptionalist discourse in light of the possibility that the detective mode prematurely seeks to restore the world to a pre-9/11 sense of order and coherence.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close as Exceptionalist Detective Story

Oskar's detective story consists of determining exactly how his father died on September 11th, but this statement greatly simplifies the novel's mess of mysteries. Oskar wants to figure out, or come as close as he can to figuring out, how his father died. Because he finds it painful to dwell on the manner of his father's death, however, he nestles that search within another: the hunt for the lock that matches a key he finds in Thomas Schell's closet.⁹⁹ This search stands as one last Reconnaissance Mission, a game Oskar and Thomas played: "Sometimes the Reconnaissance Missions were extremely simple [Oskar chooses a rock when asked to bring back an item from every decade] and sometimes they were incredibly complicated and would go on for a couple of weeks" (8).

⁹⁹ While Oskar's dual search (for the cause of his father's death and the meaning behind the key) serves as the main focus of the novel, offshoots of codes and mysteries constantly crop up. There are references to Chandra Levy (9), who joins Oskar's father and grandfather as the novel's "missing persons." Oskar also turns his father's last message into a Morse-coded bracelet that he gives to his mother, with different color beads to represent letters and silences (35). Likewise, Oskar's grandfather, who cannot speak, tries to communicate with Oskar's grandmother by using the beeps of a telephone to represent letters (269). These are the novel's "silent mysteries" that exist primarily as placeholders for traumas that go unspoken.

Oskar's father creates an atmosphere of playful mystery that encourages his son's analytical thinking and that trains him, like a detective, to see the potential of any object to play a role in creating a story. For their last Mission, Thomas gives Oskar a map of Central Park and no other clues, telling him only that the lack of clues itself might be the only clue he needs. But once Thomas dies, Oskar finds himself trapped in this perpetually unsolved mystery, simultaneously caught between the pain of being unable to forget his father and the torture of fleeting memories. More than a year after the attacks, Oskar finally goes back to his father's closet, where the two "used to Greco-Roman wrestle . . . and tell hilarious jokes . . . and put a circle of dominoes on the floor to prove that the earth rotated" (36). Once inside, Oskar cannot stop himself from looking at his father's things with an explorer's eye, seemingly picking up the hunt of the Reconnaissance Mission where it left off. Checking the pockets of Thomas's jackets, Oskar inventories what he finds, noting "a receipt for a cap, a wrapper from a miniature Krackle, and the business card of a diamond supplier" (36). He continues this inventory of his father's closet when he notices that a tuxedo is out of place, at which point his search begins: "If I hadn't noticed anything else weird, I wouldn't have thought about the tuxedo again. But I started noticing a lot" (37). Once inside this space that, as opposed to Thomas's empty coffin (36), seems to have maintained some of the fullness of his father's life, Oskar finds himself capable of re-inhabiting the detective persona that he co-created with his father.

Upon discovering a key that seems to have no connection to the family's home or to any of Thomas's possessions, Oskar more fully exhibits the traits of the detective. He explains that he first does "the logical thing" (37), trying the key in all of the apartment's locks, after which he consults a locksmith, who tells him that the only sure way to find

the matching lock is to try the key in every door he sees. However, to cast such a wide net would leave Oskar with too large an investigation; he calculates that he would need to do nothing but test locks for the rest of his life (41). He needs a way to narrow his data set, and he finds it when he sees the word “Black” written on the envelope that holds the key. Oskar notes that “a good detective would have noticed [the word] at the very beginning” (41), though in fact what Oskar experiences here is a classic detective story plot twist, the missing clue. After “think[ing] about what Stephen Hawking,” one of his many scientist idols, “would do next” (46), Oskar significantly narrows his research question: “I would spend my Saturdays and Sundays finding all of the people named Black and learning what they knew about the key in the vase in Dad’s closet. In a year and a half I would know everything. Or at least know that I had to come up with a new plan” (51). He also sets clear parameters and rules for his search: “I decided that I would go through the names alphabetically...even though it would have been a more efficient method to do it by geographical zones. [...] My other rules were that I would not be sexist again, or racist, or ageist or homophobic...” (87). He also assembles a “field kit” which includes “a Magnum flashlight, ChapStick, some Fig Newtons, plastic bags for important evidence and litter, my cell phone...a topographical map of New York, iodine pills in case of a dirty bomb, my white gloves, obviously...and a bunch of other useful stuff” (87). Armed with his tools and a clear sense of his investigation, Oskar goes out to solve the mystery of his father’s death.

Oskar thus approaches his problem with the rational intelligence of the classic detective, which provides him a script to follow when he cannot think of any other way to work through his father’s death. He launches into his conversations with the Blacks of

the city as a detective would, asking short, pointed questions: “Did you know Thomas Schell?”; “Are you sure?”; “Do you know anything about a key?” (88). When he arrives at the home of Abby Black, he repeats exactly this series of questions and then hands her the key’s envelope in the manner of a cop sliding a piece of evidence across the desk, asking “Does this mean anything to you?” (91). He then asks for coffee (93), a part of the gumshoe routine he repeats later with Ada Black (149). In each interview, Oskar performs the role of the beat detective by drinking coffee and examining the minds of his suspects. The detective story provides Oskar with the framework he needs to carry out his search and, at the same time, the existence of such a framework at first reassures Oskar that his search will have a beginning, middle, and end.

Yet, as he moves methodically through his alphabetical list of Blacks, Oskar finds that he has collected more information about the “suspects” themselves than about his father.¹⁰⁰ After meeting Ruth Black, Oskar finds himself nearing the end of his list. He tells his grandfather, “‘I’ve been searching for more than six months, and I don’t know a single thing I didn’t know six months ago. . . . [A]nd I miss my dad more than when I started, even though the whole *point* was to *stop* missing him’” (255). Approaching the end of his search, Oskar thus finds himself feeling much like he did when he began it. Back on the night he finds the key that prompts the mission, after sitting at his father’s desk and checking a closet where the two played hide and seek, Oskar “invented a special drain” that would hold the tears of everyone who cries themselves to sleep (38), presumably because he has cried himself to sleep. Likewise, at the near-end of the search

¹⁰⁰ As I explore later, part of the point of Oskar’s hunt for the Blacks is to reestablish his relationship with New York City. Following 9/11, Oskar finds himself almost unable to function in New York: he cannot use mass transit or elevators, two basic necessities of urban life. By forcing himself to visit all the Blacks, Oskar forces himself to live in the city again.

he returns to his litany of inventions: “What about subway turnstiles that were also radiation detectors? What about incredibly long ambulances that connected every building to a hospital? What about parachutes in fanny packs?” (258). Despite months of careful searching, Oskar seems to have gained nothing. The framework of the detective story, with its reassurance of some sort of useful discovery, seems to have failed him, and he seems to have remained in the same place of overwhelming sadness and painful stasis.

Yet, in keeping with his tendency to miss vital clues, Oskar does not recognize what he has discovered in the process of searching: the ability to assemble a story from his knowledge of his father’s death. By moving step-by-step through his list (“Iris Black. Jeremy Black. Kyle Black. Lori Black” [242]) and asking of each person “Do you know anything about a key?”, Oskar enacts a Baconian notion of the scientific method, wherein “research [consists] of the patient gathering of masses of details and their repeated examination until, perhaps with the aid of a systematic elimination of false possibilities, facts fall into a pattern by themselves” (Agassi 101). The scientific method, which Oskar follows when he repeats the steps of his search for the key, acts as a framework for the working through of a traumatic experience by creating a rational space within which to enact traumatic repetition.¹⁰¹ Essentially, Oskar goes over and over the same ground with each Black, a form of repetition he finds comforting and useful. Within the space of the search, he gradually moves forward in assembling the pieces of his father’s story, uncovering the last moments of Thomas’s life piece by piece with each cycle of his repetitive process of detection. As was mentioned earlier, Oskar possesses an answering machine tape that contains six voice messages in which Thomas relates where he is and

¹⁰¹ Similarly, while critic Kristiaan Versluys does not examine the use of the scientific method in the novel, he does note, “The linearity of the quest also counters the circularity of traumatic obsession. If trauma brings time to a standstill, the quest reintroduces development and movement” (115)

what is happening to him in the hour after the attacks. But Oskar had kept that phone and the answering machine locked away since “the worst day,” explaining, “I hadn’t taken it out since the worst day. It just wasn’t possible” (69). The process of detection shifts listening to the messages from the realm of the repressed to the realm of the possible. On the day that he begins his search, Oskar removes the phone from his closet, explaining, “That night when I decided that finding the lock was my ultimate *raison d’etre* . . . I really needed to hear him” (69). Oskar listens to his father’s second of five messages before placing the phone back in the closet. After visiting Abe Black, he provides the text of his father’s third message: “Message three. 9:31 A.M. *Hello? Hello? Hello?*” (168). At this point he is also able to confront his mother and ask her why she did not pick him up from school that day, implicitly asking why she was not the one to receive the burden of Thomas’s last messages (169). Message four comes directly after Oskar visits his psychiatrist, nested between searches for the A. Blacks (Agnes, Albert, Alice, Allen, Arnold) and the next week’s searches. Oskar says, “Wednesday was boring. Thursday was boring. Friday was also boring, except that it was Friday, which meant it was almost Saturday, which meant I was that much closer to the lock, which was happiness” (207). The search thus provides Oskar with a framework of repetitive action into which he can slot the more difficult aspects of dealing with his father’s loss, from conversations with his mother to his required psychological care.

Likewise, as Oskar reveals his father’s messages, from the first through the fifth, he creates a linear assemblage of Thomas’s spoken narrative of his impending death. Oskar manages to listen to five of the six messages in a row, and to tell the story of those messages, when he meets the Renter, his grandmother’s former husband and Thomas’s

father. Because the grandfather is mute,¹⁰² he acts as a safe space, an ideal witness who can only listen. As Oskar explains, “I asked the renter, ‘Can I tell you my story?’ He opened his left hand [gesture for ‘yes’]. So I put my story into it” (238). For the first time Oskar finds himself capable of telling the story of the search for the lock, after which he plays his father’s messages, saying, “‘No one else has ever heard that’” (255). At this moment, part of Oskar comes close to completing his mission; however, his search for the lock has not ended, nor has he told the whole story of the “worst day.” Following another fruitless conversation with Peter Black, he returns home and reports that, “after eight months of searching,” he “went up to [his] laboratory, but [he] didn’t feel like performing any experiments” (287-88). About to give up, Oskar learns (in another fortuitous plot twist) that one of the first Blacks he met, Abby, knew something about the key that she was first unwilling to tell Oskar.¹⁰³ From Abby, Oskar learns that the key matches a lock to a safe owned by Abby’s ex-husband, William Black, who answers many of Oskar’s questions about the key and the vase in which it was hidden (298). More importantly, however, Oskar moves from telling his story to someone who cannot speak, the grandfather, to someone who can, and, in the process, he reveals another unspoken detail of that story: Oskar tells William that there were in fact six messages (not five, as he told the grandfather), and that the sixth call came while he was home and could have received it. He explains, “‘I couldn’t pick up the phone. I just couldn’t do it. It rang and

¹⁰² The grandfather gradually loses the ability to speak after he witnesses the bombing of Dresden, in which he loses his entire family as well as his intended wife, who is carrying his child.

¹⁰³ In a further twist, she calls Oskar not long after his visit to tell him (he gave her his number on a business card), but his mother answers the phone and so learns of Oskar’s search. Abby’s message is thus another of the text’s undelivered messages (joining Thomas’s voice messages and the letters unsent by the grandfather), but more importantly, it allows Oskar to understand why many of the Blacks knew he was coming to see them. Oskar is somewhat dismayed by this knowledge, however, since he states, “My search was a play that Mom had written, and she knew the ending when I was at the beginning” (292).

rang, and I couldn't move. I wanted to pick it up, but I couldn't'" (301).¹⁰⁴ The repressed content of this phone call returns to Oskar at this moment, as he tells William what he has always known: "'I've timed the message, and it's one minute and twenty-seven seconds. Which means it ended at 10:24. Which was when the building came down. So maybe that's how he died'" (302). Notably, the North Tower collapsed at 10:28, not 10:24, suggesting that Oskar searches not for the final and complete truth of his father's death, but for a reasonable enough story to substitute in its place. That is, while he has claimed that a desire to know exactly what happened to his father motivates his search, he will never obtain a full and complete explanation of those lost minutes. Instead, Oskar is satisfied when he can finally recover his knowledge of the messages and address his guilt regarding that last unanswered call. He asks William Black for forgiveness not for not answering the phone but "'For not being able to tell anyone'" (302). Thus, in the moment that the seemingly impossible happens and Oskar finds the lock that matches the key, two mysteries are solved: Oskar's final Reconnaissance Mission ends, and he tells as much of Thomas's story as he possibly can.

The process of detection leads Oskar to both the discovery and the rectification of his own "crime." When incapable of facing what he knows about Thomas's death, Oskar treats the answering machine like a corpse, wrapping it in his grandmother's knitting, which he then puts in a bag inside of a box inside of another box before hiding it in his closet (69). Yet the phone calls to him like a tell-tale heart, reminding him of what he knows but cannot say. In this sense, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* demonstrates the "complex double narrative" of detective fiction "in which an absent story, that of a

¹⁰⁴ Thomas's phone calls and Oskar's inability to receive them belong to the novel's larger network of silences and messages unsent, from the Turkish labor's letter to Grandma that goes unanswered, to Thomas Schell Sr.'s letters to his son that never fill the envelopes that are sent to Grandma.

crime, is gradually reconstructed in the second story (the investigation)” (Marcus 245).

Oskar stands as both the perpetrator and the detective of his own perceived crime.

Because he cannot at first confront the knowledge of his father’s manner of death, he must undertake the process of detection in order to rediscover it. The mystery of the key thus both hides and reveals the deeper mystery of Thomas’s death. Through the process of detection, Oskar reconstructs his own story of the phone messages, but he can only recover this knowledge by means of the research process, the recursive nature of which allows him to work through his traumatic experience of hearing what he assumes are his father’s last words before his death.

The search for the lock also provides a sense of forward progression in a novel otherwise marked by a number of digressions, including multiple narrative voices (Oskar, his grandmother, and his grandfather); shifts in time from 1944 Dresden to September 11th to the current day; and textual interruptions via pictures, letters, blank spaces, and colorful corrections. Briefly, the novel alternates between Oskar’s story, which is the novel’s main narrative, and letters written to Oskar by his grandmother and to Oskar’s father by the grandfather that mainly discuss the bombing of Dresden. One brief chapter also consists of a transcript of survivor testimony from the Hiroshima bombing. By interweaving these stories, Foer contrasts Oskar’s willingness to undertake the effort of mourning his father with the grandfather’s unwillingness or inability to do the same work. Oskar’s narrative of detection, like the letters written by his grandparents, attempts to discuss how one can choose, or refuse, to move forward after a stunning loss caused by an historic event. For Oskar’s grandparents, this means learning to live with the losses incurred in the firebombing of Dresden. Foer makes it clear that, like their grandson, the

elder Schells¹⁰⁵ possess a natural tendency to see the world as a series of playful riddles and joyful mysteries, but this tendency is disrupted—and for the grandfather erased—by the bombing. For example, Grandma, whose story is a letter to Oskar detailing her life in Dresden before the bombing, tells Oskar, “I am an old woman now, but once I was a girl. It’s true. I was a girl like you are a boy. One of my chores was to bring in the mail” (75). In the mail she finds a strange letter, postmarked 15 years prior, from a man in a Turkish labor camp, which prompts her to try to “learn as much about the man as I could from the letter” (76). Soon she begins to collect letters from everyone she knows: “I laid them out on my bedroom floor, and organized them by what they shared. One hundred letters. I was always moving them around, trying to make connections. I wanted to understand” (79).¹⁰⁶ Here Grandma’s words mimic Oskar’s, who, in the Central Park Reconnaissance Mission, plots the points of found objects on a map of the park and finds that “I could connect them to make almost anything I wanted, which meant I wasn’t getting closer to anything” (10). While Oskar and his grandmother seem to help each other preserve this sense of mystery (they speak via walkie-talkie, and she accompanies him on some of his Reconnaissance Missions in the city), Oskar’s grandfather loses that part of his life forever in Dresden.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Oskar’s grandparents were acquaintances in Germany who were united in their common loss of Anna, Grandma’s sister and the grandfather’s partner, who was pregnant with their child at the time of her death. They reunited in the United States and were married there, and Grandma became pregnant with Oskar’s father against the grandfather’s wishes to start a family. The grandfather then abandons Grandma and Thomas, only to return when he learns of Thomas’s death.

¹⁰⁶ The grandfather’s letters demonstrate a similar playfulness. Like Oskar, he dreams up strange and beautiful creations, like a home that is “a clock tower with a stopped clock in a city where time stood still” (208-09) and trees with “rings of letters in their trunks” (114).

¹⁰⁷ As Kristiaan Versluys points out, “America . . . fails to work its transformative magic” for Oskar’s grandparents, in that they are not able to start anew and forget their old lives in Germany simply by moving to America (86).

Unlike his grandfather, who is always on the run from his painful past and potentially difficult future, Oskar, by choosing to remain present in his suffering rather than attempt to escape it, also recovers his relationship to his city. The grandfather leaves Dresden for New York and New York for Dresden, but Oskar remains in New York even though it frightens him. At the beginning of his search Oskar cannot move through the city without seeing threats everywhere: “Even after a year, I still had an extremely difficult time doing certain things, like taking showers, for some reason, and getting into elevators, obviously. There was a lot of stuff that made me panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks . . . scaffolding, sewers and subway grates, bags without owners . . . tall buildings, turbans” (36). Because Oskar researches everything, he knows too much about real and perceived threats against the city and has no way of distinguishing between the two. As a result, when he starts his journey, he spends hours walking from borough to borough because he cannot manage to brave public transportation (87). Likewise, his fear of elevators, triggered by stories of people trapped in them in the Towers, makes it impossible for him to enter most tall buildings. Yet, by the time he visits Ruth Black, he finds himself capable of taking an elevator to the observation deck of the Empire State Building. While he must battle his obsessions during the ascent by imagining all the ways he might die were the building subject to attack (244), his process of searching still regains for him some of the literal ground he lost. Oskar rebuilds an intimate if still fraught relationship with New York by relearning how to live in it after the attacks.¹⁰⁸ The novel thus contrasts Oskar’s constant, if frenetic,

¹⁰⁸ See also Chapter Four’s discussion of the relationship between New Yorkers and their city in *The Colossus of New York*.

movement with the grandfather's stasis as a means of asserting the very possibility of working through and moving past a traumatic experience of an historic tragedy.

That the story of Thomas's death can be reassembled though his remains cannot and that a child can stop hiding in his room and learn to ride elevators again lends *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* a mildly exceptionalist tone by suggesting the possibility of triumph in the face of the losses and fears of terrorism. Oskar does not attain some predetermined notion of closure, however: finding the lock is in part more devastating because it means, as Oskar explains, that he can no longer look for it.¹⁰⁹ The end point of his search does not mean that the broken relationship with his father is somehow repaired. Instead, as he admits to his grandfather, it finalizes the permanence of the wound. At the same time, by establishing that the scientific method can function as a productive means of mourning, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* opens a space for a consideration of science as a redemptive cultural force rather than a force of domination and destruction. During the course of his search, Oskar confronts the many ways in which his nation has used its scientific powers to destroy its enemies. Part Two further explores the construction of Oskar as scientist in order to examine the ways in which he sees himself working in and against a troubling scientific tradition.

¹⁰⁹ According to critic Earl Ingersoll, locating the lock "offers both the temporary comfort of eventually being able to solve the puzzle, along with a suppressed awareness, that solutions to puzzles cannot map passages into the future. In the end, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* will reveal the solution to the mystery of the key, only to demonstrate that such 'truth' cannot be ultimately satisfying" (55).

Part Two: The Imagination Against Disaster

Part One of this chapter traces the ways in which the novel presents Oskar as part-detective, part-scientist, a researcher with a question and a means by which to come as close as possible to answering it. Oskar states that his goal is to determine, among all of the possible ways his father could have been killed on September 11th, which death “was his.” Oskar’s speculative visions of those possible deaths trouble him almost as much as the fact that his father has died. Along with this understanding of the terrible fantasies his own mind can create, Oskar must confront the fact that the imagination he values so much, and which helps him to remember Thomas, can be put to terrible use. That is, in the midst of his search, Oskar grapples with the function of scientific inventions, and in particular military technology, in society. Part Two discusses Oskar’s self-perception as an inventor among inventors. Linking Oskar’s recognition of the role his own government played in Hiroshima with the grandfather’s description of the Dresden bombing, the novel advocates a version of science that would replace dominance and death with community and life. By positing an alternative science that would disrupt the nation’s tradition of dominance through technological might, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* works against notions of tech-based superiority that undergird exceptionalist thinking.

Besides being a detective, Oskar also strongly identifies as an inventor. One of his many lists of inventions opens the novel, and his ideas range from a singing teakettle to microphones that “played the sounds of our hearts through little speakers” (1). According to some critics, his manic need to invent in the face of difficult memories or imagined threats represents Oskar’s pathological obsession with his father’s death and his desire to

dream up some way that he might have stopped it. Sein Uytterschout calls Oskar's inventions "a conscious effort to divert his overactive imagination from more pessimistic and even self-tormenting imaginings" (194), while Naomi Mandel considers them symptomatic of a "crisis" of the self (252). Kristiaan Versluys reads Oskar even more negatively, calling his inventions "an obsessive linguistic tic" symptomatic of his "desperation": "This compulsive indulgence in excess compensatory imagination is so intrusive and the inventions themselves often so weird and off-the-wall that they color the whole novel" (102). While they certainly are intrusive, Oskar's inventions form a key part of the novel's engagement with science. Particularly, when viewing *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as a coming-of-age story, 9/11 represents the moment when Oskar's simplistic view of technology is destroyed. His faith, as he states early in the story, lies in science. He explains, "I used to be an atheist, which means I didn't believe in things that couldn't be observed" (4). Yet as a child he was shielded against the worst meanings of that word, as is clear when Grandma gives him a block of stamps in honor of "Great American Inventors" (104). Reading the inventors together, they come to Oppenheimer. Oskar asks, "'Who's he?' 'He invented the bomb.' 'Which bomb?' 'The bomb.' 'He wasn't a Great Inventor!' She said, 'Great, not good'" (104). As an adult, Grandma recognizes that Oppenheimer's genius can co-exist with his moral failing, but Oskar has more difficulty grasping the fact that not all "great" science is also good.

Oskar must confront the destructive uses of technology head-on when he gives a class presentation on the bombing on Hiroshima. In the "Happiness, Happiness" section of the novel, Foer records a first-hand account of the bombing by a survivor named Tomoyasu. Tomoyasu describes the loss of her daughter in the bombing and then ends

her testimony by saying, “It doesn’t matter what uniforms the soldiers are wearing. It doesn’t matter how good the weapons are. I thought if everyone could see what we saw, we would never have war anymore” (189). Tomoyasu’s fictionalized final comment directly implicates the United States and its “good” weapons in the destruction of her city.¹¹⁰ Having experienced 9/11 as a personal tragedy in the same way that Tomoyasu experiences the loss of her daughter in the Hiroshima bombing, Oskar connects with Tomoyasu’s knowledge that war feels the same to civilians no matter who wages it. Tomoyasu’s testimony also works to draw together Oskar’s and his family’s experiences on 9/11 and his grandfather’s experience during the bombing of Dresden. Several of Tomoyasu’s observations match those made by Oskar and his family regarding their experiences of trauma. For example, everyone describes the normal course of the day that precedes the moment of impact. Tomoyasu says, “I folded the bedding. I rearranged the closet. I cleaned the windows with a wet rag. There was a flash. My first thought was that it was the flash from a camera” (187). Likewise, Oskar describes the moment before he hears his father’s message as “I took the elevator for the last time. I opened the apartment door, put down my bag, and took off my shoes” (68). Oskar’s grandfather thinks of the last normal moment before the bombs fall on Dresden similarly, writing, “At 9:30 that night, the air-raid sirens sounded, everyone went to the shelters, but no one hurried, we were use to the alarm.... The families on our street turned off the lights in their houses and filed into the shelter” (210). Tomoyasu, Oskar, and the grandfather thus experience the painful fracturing of daily routine—a routine that stands even in the midst of war for Tomoyasu and the grandfather—that is wholly unexpected.

¹¹⁰ According to Aaron Mauro, “While most of the interview has been taken by Foer verbatim from internet sources, these last lines cannot be found in the original testimony of Kinue Tomoyasu, but seem to present the novelist’s own artistic intervention into the historical record” (461).

In the aftermath of the bombing, Tomoyasu describes the search for her daughter, saying “I was trying to find my Masako. [...] I was trying to find her. [...] I kept looking for Masako. I heard someone crying, ‘Mother!’ I recognized her voice. [...] She said, ‘It took you so long.’ I apologized to her. I told her, ‘I came as fast as I could’” (188).

Oskar’s grandmother and grandfather both describe a similar experience of helpless searching after the Dresden bombing, an experience that is repeated by Oskar’s mother after the attacks and by Oskar in the search for the lock. Oskar’s conversation with his mother regarding where she was on the day of the attacks also mimics Masako’s conversation with Tomoyasu. Oskar yells, “‘Where were you!’” twice and asks his mother why she was not home, to which she responds, “Oskar, I came home as soon as I could” (169). After Oskar insists that “‘you should have been home when I got home,’” she replies again, “‘I got home as quickly as I could’” (169). Tomoyasu’s belief, that death is death no matter the uniform that delivers it, is borne out by the experiences of Oskar and his family in New York and Dresden, respectively. Foer thus focuses on acts of war perpetrated by the United States against other nations in order to create a tragic continuum that refuses an exceptionalist portrayal of the September 11th attacks.

At the same time, Oskar’s utter fascination with the Hiroshima bombing betrays a seductiveness of science that he does not quite know how to resist. Discussing the Tomoyasu testimony, Oskar explains, “‘Because the radiant heat traveled in straight lines from the explosion, scientists were able to determine the direction toward the hypocenter from a number of different points.... The shadows gave an indication of the height of the burst of the bomb...’” (189). While his classmates call him “weird,” Oskar goes on with his explanation of Hiroshima as a terrible yet enthralling experiment, noting how the utter

destruction of a chess match bears out the fact that “dark colors absorb light”: “The bomb destroyed everything: the spectators in the seats, the people who were filming the match, their black cameras.... All that was left were white pieces on white square islands” (189-190). At this point, Oskar is so fascinated by the science of Hiroshima that he seems to skip right past its inhumanity. According to Saal, “Oskar remains completely unmoved by the suffering he relays via tape recorder. In his commentary, he focuses on reciting the scientific data of nuclear destruction. [...] [I]t is rather startling since it points up the limits of an empathetic dialogue with the pain of others” (461). While Oskar’s lack of emotion does seem startling, it stems from his desire to essentially hide inside science as a way of dealing with overwhelming sorrow and as an attempt to connect with his father. On the whole, Oskar tends to retreat into a mechanical version of himself when overstressed. During the limousine ride to his father’s funeral, he tries to make the driver laugh by using his “Stephen Hawking voice” (4). In that robotic voice, he says, “Oskar’s CPU is a neural-net processor. A learning computer. The more contact he has with humans, the more he learns” (4-5). He also mimics the “you’ve got mail” voice when talking to others. Of course, Oskar does not lack emotion; rather, he is overburdened by it. He thus retreats into that voice at some times and at others uses voices like Tomoyasu’s to speak for him. Likewise, his “robot voice” connects him to the voice of his father, who now exists only as a voice in an answering machine, just as his fascination with Hiroshima connects to his desire to solve the mystery of his father’s death. His fascination with the process of detection that reveals the details of the bombing seems to give him hope that he can discover the facts of his father’s death in just the same way.

Oskar thus experiences 9/11 as a move from innocence to experience, not just because he loses his father but because he loses the ability to believe that science is always on the side of right. Arguably, this is the purpose of Foer's child narrator: to align the American view of the nation as exceptional with a childlike understanding of the nation's place in the world. Just as Oskar must confront the existence of scientists who are "great, not good," the American reader must recognize the ways in which such revelations lead to the conclusion that the United States is not blameless and beloved. Indeed, critics tend to locate the novel's anti-exceptionalist agenda in the interweaving of the disasters of Hiroshima, Dresden, and New York. As critic Matthew Mullins explains, "Foer's novel becomes a space in which to challenge...America's sense of being the lone victim after 9/11 and to promote instead a connection between victimization and identity that breaches existing collective identities" (313). Similarly, Benjamin Bird argues that the novel encourages readers to see the attacks "against the backdrop of greater historical crises" (564). By encouraging a sense of what Mullins calls "traumatic solidarity" (321), the novel works against notions of the United States as a nation both above attack and, in the face of attack, permitted to seek revenge. A transhistorical view of trauma "form[s] a bridge between disparate historical experiences," thereby "contribut[ing] to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community" (Craps 1).¹¹¹ By focusing not so much on the events themselves as on their aftermath, Foer highlights the fact that, "[d]espite their political complexities and differences, the effects [of Dresden and of

¹¹¹ It should be noted that Craps and Buelens would likely read Foer in the tradition of trauma novels that "Instead of promoting solidarity between different cultures...risks producing the very opposite effect" due to an exclusionary focus on Western events (Dresden, 9/11). They argue that such a focus "may actually assist in the perpetuation of Eurocentric views and structures that maintain or widen the gap between the West and the rest of the world" ("Introduction" 1).

9/11] on victims are the same” (Dawes 531).¹¹² The connections among all of these disasters certainly work to counter exceptionalist viewpoints of “the good war,” especially in that Oskar sees friends where his country would have him see enemies (his grandmother and Tomoyasu both belong to the Axis powers, not the Allies). But they also serve to highlight the connections between the United States’ military technology and the inventiveness of the 9/11 hijackers. That is, Foer places the inventiveness of Oppenheimer on a continuum with the inventiveness of bin Laden, equating the two in the same way that the traumatic experiences of New York, Dresden, and Hiroshima are linked.¹¹³ As a researcher, Oskar approaches his father’s death in the same way he approaches the story of Tomoyasu, suggesting that he sees no difference between acts perpetrated against his country and acts his own country has taken against others.

But to just leave it there, to accept that science is in fact a terrible, destructive discipline, would suggest that Oskar must abandon his father and their co-interests and shared pursuits altogether. While readings that locate the novel’s anti-exceptionalist agenda in the linkage of Dresden, Hiroshima, and New York are valuable, they neglect to account for the novel’s primary concern, which is the recovery of a damaged relationship between a father and a son. Their relationship is damaged because, until he can accept Thomas’s death, Oskar cannot remember his life, including the life in science that he and his father shared. Oskar identifies as an “inventor, jewelry designer, jewelry fabricator,

¹¹² See also, Versluys, who argues that the novel is politically successful in its attempt to work against “us vs. them” rhetoric (82-83).

¹¹³ The failure of the imagination to manifest anything but a dystopic future has become a common trait in 9/11 novels. In *The Emperor’s Children*, for example, Bootie, a childish young man, considers the attacks on the World Trade Center as a startling feat of imagination: “Only on Monday night, they’d still been planning, and it had all been in their heads, then, and not yet unleashed upon the world. It was an awesome, a fearful thought: you could make something inside your head, as huge and devastating as this, and spill it out into reality, make it really happen” (439). Bootie’s realization mimics that of Karlheinz Stockhausen, the German composer who likened 9/11 to a spectacular, world-altering work of art, far superior to traditional artistic expression, that begins with years of preparation and ends with the artist’s death.

amateur entomologist, francophile, vegan, origamist, pacifist, percussionist, amateur astronomer, computer consultant, amateur archaeologist” (99). Amidst his artistic pursuits, his scientific interests and his pacifism/veganism stand side by side. This desire to move through the world without doing harm to others forms a key part of Oskar’s identity and, while perhaps it is attributable only to his youth and innocence, his obsession with life-saving inventions asks the reader to consider that it could become a scientist’s lifework.¹¹⁴

Though he is clearly obsessed with doing no harm to any living thing, Oskar occasionally dreams of violence. He imagines, for example, kicking in the head of Jimmy Snyder, his tormentor, or yelling “Fuck you!” at Abe Black when Abe decides to give up the search for the lock. But, in reality, he keeps those feelings inside, shaking hands with Abe when he would rather be screaming, asking whether a roadside tamale stand is vegan, and mounting only bugs that died “natural deaths” in his entomologist’s collection. When he dreams of inventions, he focuses on ideas that could have saved his father’s life or, barring that, saved others from the mental anguish of loss. He thinks of a skyscraper that “moved up and down while its elevator stayed in place. [...] Also, that could be extremely useful, because if...a plane hits below you, the building could take you to the ground, and everyone could be safe” (3). He also imagines a device that would communicate between loved ones when someone is hurt, so that an ambulance could deliver messages like “It’s nothing major! It’s nothing major!” or “Goodbye! I love you! Goodbye! I love you!” (72). Oskar also attempts to find ways to prevent minor troubles

¹¹⁴ At times Oskar seems like a version of a young Foer, and nowhere is that more clear than in the character’s vegan politics, especially in light of Foer’s recent nonfiction work, *Eating Animals* (2009). Foer argues that eating animals is a choice and a tradition but not an absolute. That argument would seem to extend to the use of science to create military technologies: a choice and a tradition, but not an absolute.

and major battles from the start, imagining “a chemical that responded to a combination of things, like your heartbeat...and your brain waves, so that your skin changed color according to your mood? [...] Everyone could know what everyone else felt, and we could be more careful with each other” (163). While many of these inventions are elaborate devices designed to lessen mental anguish, others are a part of a long list of ways Oskar’s father could have been saved. Oskar thinks, “What about parachutes in fanny packs? What about guns with sensors in the handles that could detect if you were angry... What about skyscrapers made with moving parts, so they could rearrange themselves when they had to, and even open holes in their middles for planes to fly through?” (259). Devices like the fanny pack parachute form a part of the real-life post-9/11 consideration of how more lives might have been saved (e.g. considerations of attempts to perform rescues via helicopter from the roof).¹¹⁵ Others, like the gravity-defying skyscraper, form a part of the landscape that Oskar the scientist must deny Oskar the inventor. As he explains earlier in the novel, “Dad used to teach me physics with crayons on paper tablecloths while we waited for our pancakes” (147). Oskar knows that most of his inventions are not practically possible; early in the novel, he says, “We need enormous pockets, pockets big enough for our families, and our friends.... But I knew there couldn’t be pockets that enormous. In the end, everyone loses everyone. There was no invention to get around that” (74).

Oskar thus recognizes the failure of his own inventions against those of the Great Inventors; it would seem that none of the good he imagines could undo all of the bad in his world. Unlike Oppenheimer or bin Laden, Oskar is no criminal mastermind, and he knows that many of his inventions lie outside the realm of the possible. Even so, his

¹¹⁵ Oddly enough, the backpack parachute exists and was put into development not long after 9/11.

inventiveness contributes to the novel's overall comment on the possibility of scientific practice as an act of community-building and as a socially-minded practice. From the start of his journey, Oskar searches not just for a lock but also for a mentor. While Oskar reaches out to a wide network of scientists and non-scientists alike,¹¹⁶ he is most enamored of Stephen Hawking, to whom he writes, "Can I please be your protégé?" (11). Among the many letters Oskar sends and receives, some concern research positions; for example, he is "rejected" first by the team that runs the elephant research he mentions in his conversations with Abby Black and later by Jane Goodall (199). While Oskar faces much rejection in his search for a mentor, his intelligence helps him to connect with the people he meets. In a conversation with Abby, for example, he mentions a number of different strange facts, such as "touching my throat . . . is the universal sign for thirsty" (91) or "seventy percent of household dust is actually composed of human epidermal matter" (93).¹¹⁷ Using knowledge of science as a means of connecting with strangers, Oskar succeeds in forming important relationships with the Blacks he meets, as evidenced by their attendance at his school play (143). In this sense, the facts Oskar collects and the knowledge he (sometimes over-) produces demonstrate a redemptive quality by becoming the foundation of Oskar's new post-9/11 family.

But it is Oskar's correspondence with Stephen Hawking that exemplifies not just the importance of scientific practice as a method of community-building, but also the novel's vision of a marriage of poetics and science that would presumably transform the

¹¹⁶ Oskar also writes to celebrities like Ringo Starr, who thanks Oskar for sending bulletproof drumsticks (40). While in this letter Oskar is reaching out to someone who was meaningful to Thomas ("I Am The Walrus" is Thomas's favorite song), the drumsticks also betray Oskar's obsession with untimely death (John Lennon's, his father's).

¹¹⁷ Notably, these little facts and figures also bear the signs of Oskar's ongoing obsession with his father's death. Noting the sign for thirsty draws on his interest in distress signals, and how one demonstrates the need for help, while the fact about the composition of dust references the dust cloud that hovered over Manhattan after the collapse of the WTC and was in part composed of vaporized bodies.

purpose of research. Having already received many automated responses from Hawking's assistants, Oskar finally gets a personal letter from Hawking, who writes, "You can have a bright future in the sciences, Oskar. I would be happy to do anything possible to facilitate such a path" (304). Hawking offers himself as a complement to, but not a replacement for, Oskar's father. The reader never sees Oskar's many letters to Hawking—rarely, in fact, sees any of Oskar's outgoing mail—but Hawking's comments are telling. Referencing Oskar's continued and apparently elaborate correspondence by saying "the more of yourself you gave," Hawking writes, "It's wonderful to think what would happen if you put your imagination toward scientific ends" (304). Oskar has clearly told Hawking about his inventions, and Hawking happily endorses not necessarily the inventions themselves but the mindset from which they spring. Specifically, he tells Oskar that he wishes he had been a poet, which he has "never confessed...to anyone," because he wishes he "had made things for life to depend on" (305). Hawking thus invites Oskar to interrogate the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, asserting that the works of the imagination can in fact be "more real" than hard science. Regarding Oskar's bizarre inventions, Hawking posits, "Maybe you're not inventing at all" (305), encouraging Oskar to see that his imagination is just as real as the dark matter of the universe on which "the fragile balance" of life depends precisely because those inventions express an imaginative (for Hawking, poetic) desire to create a different world than the one in which they currently live. Hawking's words to Oskar echo Oskar's conversation with Thomas at the beginning of the novel, in which the two discuss Hawking's *Brief History of Time*. But unlike Thomas, who claims, "We could imagine all sorts of universes unlike this one, but this is the one that happened'" (13), and who, as

Oskar's mother points out, practiced a "black and white" way of thinking, Hawking suggests to Oskar that the universes of which he dreams, in which skyscrapers defy the laws of physics, need not be confined to the realm of the imagination. In fact, the very act of imagining them brings them into being, if not in this universe, then in another.

This emphasis on the power of the imagination as a redemptive force that can bring other possible worlds into being stands as the novel's strongest anti-exceptionalist statement. By suggesting that the process of creating alternate universes produces a tangible reality no less legitimate for being imagined, Foer asserts the function of the redemptive scientific imagination as a counter-power to the destructive uses of technology. As critic Magali Michael argues, rather than acting merely as a "coping mechanism," "This capacity of the imagination to create alternatives . . . contains a utopic quality that is crucial to moving past the horrors and losses of the terrorist attacks and into the future" (38). Beyond simply providing hope for the future, Oskar's scientific imagination rewards him with a community in the here-and-now. He does not simply rebuild or replace what he lost on 9/11; he builds an alternate universe, a diverse community of New Yorkers and others that would not have existed without his search. While Oskar once depended on his father as a source of knowledge and of answers to riddles and searches, he has moved to a multi-layered community of seekers. Most importantly, the Hawking section of the novel creates a sense of positive unpredictability: if Oskar begins the novel battling his overwhelming fear of the countless unnamed "stuff" that might happen to him in his new post-attack reality, he ends his journey believing his own imagination is powerful enough to create counter-realities. Likewise, Foer counters the exceptionalist notion that the attacks themselves should be knowable,

containable, and preventable. While nothing about Oskar's imagination is containable, the text posits his ideas as what the nation's post-9/11 technologies ought to look like, with a focus not on domination and destruction but on creation and community.

Part Three: Engaging the Ethical Reader

While the above reading of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as a story of scientific discovery demonstrates that Oskar's quest to create a redemptive scientific community of knowledge production and scientific practice works against the exceptionalist impulse that surfaced after 9/11, the novel's ending remains problematic. The final passages of the novel reverse the events of the day that lead to the death of Thomas Schell before closing with a series of images that show a body floating up through the sky and off the page, so that the reader is left with a seemingly undamaged building. Though some critics read these images as a reiteration of an exceptionalist mode that considers the attacks especially worthy of a miraculous un-doing,¹¹⁸ my reading first explores how the novel's ending exhibits the end result of Oskar's desire to rethink scientific practice as redemptive rather than destructive or punitive. Then, moving from the text to the reader's experience of the text, I consider Foer's flipbook and other visuals as an invitation to the reader to participate in the work of witnessing. By placing various visual "clues" throughout the text, Foer's ongoing engagement with the detective genre encourages readers to sit with those clues and to keep looking until they "know everything. Or at least know [they have to] come up with a new plan" (Foer 51). By requiring slow and careful viewing, the text's visuals allow the reader to consider how to

¹¹⁸ See especially Greenwald Smith, who argues that tend Foer's novel "substitute[s] formal novelty for conceptual novelty and substitute[s] experiments in representing what exists for the creation of what does not yet exist" (159-60).

responsibly view a traumatic event. That is, by asking the reader to work alongside Oskar rather than merely observe his efforts, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* uses the detective's emphasis on careful looking and watching to model the work of the ethical witness. Finally, because these clues are at times indecipherable, the text reasserts the notion that 9/11 remains uncontainable and unknowable, regardless of readers' or officials' attempts to "solve" the crime or award it a sense of meaning or closure.

The last fifteen pages of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* present a series of images that show a body moving by half-inches from the right edge of the page's border, up through the sky, and finally out of the frame. Run together, these images allow the reader to perform the flip movie that Oskar has created when he rips the pages of the falling man out of his scrapbook and reorders them so that "it looked like the man was floating up through the sky" (325). The flip movie allows Oskar to imagine a complete reversal of the day's events: "[I]f I'd had more pictures, he wouldn't flown through the window, back into the building....[A]nd the plane would've flown backward away from [Dad], all the way to Boston" (325). Oskar continues thinking backwards, so that his father "unbrushed his teeth, and put hair on his face with a razor," until he finally rejoins Oskar on the night before his death, and "We would have been safe" (326). This notion of an imagined return to safety, and to a reordered experience in which 9/11 can be undone, seems to garner more negative than positive critical attention. Journalist critics, including Michiko Kakutani, call the novel's images "razzle-dazzle" techniques that attempt to "get traction on horrific events" but instead "[verge] on the whimsical rather than the galvanic or persuasive" ("A Boy's Epic Quest, Borough by Borough"). John Updike's review softens that blow just a bit, noting that "the flip-the-pages device present in some

children's books . . . is one of the most curious happy endings ever contrived, and unexpectedly moving." Yet he still states, in essence, that Foer might want to take it easy with the "graphic apparatus" that "covers up a certain hollow monotony in [the book's] verbal drama" ("Mixed Messages").¹¹⁹ Kakutani speaks for the critics who have simply had enough of Foer's tricks, while Updike represents those who admire the attempt more than the execution.

Yet those aspects of the novel that Updike finds intriguing—its children's picture book pages and contrived but happy ending—frustrate the majority of Foer's academic critics. Specifically, they read the ending of the novel as a reconsolidation of the United States' position as an exceptional nation in that its experience of trauma requires and can even expect redemption.¹²⁰ Rachel Greenwald Smith argues that the end of the novel, despite its formal experimentation, actually works to reinforce the status quo by separating out 9/11 from the other catastrophes in the novel and working to establish those conditions—that is, the challenge to the exceptionalist nation—as worthy of undoing. She writes, "Our present moment therefore is characterized by a surprising intimacy between ostensibly world-changing catastrophes and the expansion of existing political policies. This historical condition runs parallel to the intimacy we see in Foer's work between seemingly innovative formal experimentation and the creation of

¹¹⁹ Birgit Dawes notes that Updike could not have been reading Foer too closely, since he calls Oskar's cat, Buckminster, a dog, and makes a few other little mistakes. However, Updike's review stands as an example of those that would give Foer's attempt to relate an experience of trauma the benefit of the doubt.

¹²⁰ This is part of a larger critical trend to read the ending of the novel as a positive and redemptive form of closure. Benjamin Bird claims that the novel's linkage of September 11th and the bombing of Dresden represents "an apparent symbol of hope, which promises the possibility of eventual recovery from 9/11" (564). He also claims that Oskar's cemetery visit is "an act of love" that suggests all that violence destroyed can be mended" (118). Similarly, Versluys claims that Abe Black proves that "personal and historical trauma (as well as the infirmities of extreme age) can be vanquished by love and a cheerful engagement in the world" (113). He also reads Stephen Hawking's letter to Oskar as advice to "accept every day as a gift," (111), an oddly reductive reading of that part of the novel.

sentiments that support the emotional and political status quo” (159). Far from considering it innovative, Greenwald Smith reads the novel’s graphic techniques as a reiteration of that same construction of the United States that contributed to the attacks. Similarly, Ilka Saal reads the flipbook not as an aberration but as a natural extension of Oskar’s ability to become close to his mother by novel’s end:¹²¹ “In returning Oskar to the safety of the family bosom, Foer provides a felt solution to problems that cannot really be solved without challenging the very ideological order in which they are embedded along with the ‘moral certainty’ to which the narrative wishes to return.... Foer’s conclusion attempts such a retrieval of a lost pre-9/11 innocence. Even as Oskar’s flipbook of the falling man reminds us that such locus might have been utopian to begin with, the melodramatic family reunion at least suggests to us what such a return ‘home’ might feel like” (472). Saal goes so far as to claim that the novel’s ending undoes all of its transnational work of viewing 9/11 in context of other traumatic events: “Foer’s novel . . . speaks to a prevalent need in American readers for reconsolidating one’s own (as well as the nation’s) wounded identity by returning to the very clear-cut boundaries between self and other Foer’s references to Hiroshima, Dresden, and Westerbork¹²² do little to disrupt the nation’s prevalent narrative framing habits, nor to resituate the collective experience of September 11 within a complex historical awareness of global vulnerabilities...” (472). Both Greenwald Smith and Saal read in the novel’s ending an impulse to return to both a national and a personal pre-9/11 status quo. Such an impulse

¹²¹ Not unexpectedly, Oskar’s mother shoulders much of Oskar’s anger regarding the father’s death. She is at turns ridiculed for not missing Thomas enough and for moving on from Thomas to another man, Ron. Oskar also holds her responsible for not being home to receive Thomas’s final phone call, which would have saved him from being its sole recipient/witness.

¹²² Simon Goldberg, the friend of the Schell family who is presumably hidden or at least helped by the Schells, sends Thomas Sr. a letter from Westerbork, a transit camp in the Netherlands.

not only stands as an example of exceptionalist discourse (i.e. the United States deserves, more than any other country, to be restored to its previous state) but also requires deep investment in that discourse in order to occur (i.e. the United States, more than any other country, possesses the ability to return to that unaltered, unchallenged state).

This reading of the novel's desire—which is, specifically, Oskar's *childlike* desire—to rewind the tape and return to the world as it was on September 10th seems at first to be connected to Foer's use of the detective genre at a narrative framework. As was explored in Part One of this chapter, Peter Hühn explains the function of the detective novel: "The lonely and (socially) marginalized intellectual is shown to possess the power to defuse the threats of disrupting social forces by simply reading, that is, interpreting and explaining, them" (464). Indeed, Oskar journeys across Manhattan not to learn, but to interpret what he already knows about his father's death. Detective fiction thus attempts to do exactly that restorative (and exceptionalist) storytelling work that Saal and others describe. Yet there are crucial differences. First, like Chabon's Holmes, Foer's Oskar is denied the satisfaction of a closed case. While for Holmes this means recognizing that he cannot yet comprehend certain wartime atrocities, for Oskar it means dissatisfaction with the ending of his father's story ("I found it and now I can't look for it" [304]). That is, Oskar recognizes that his father's story will forever feel unfinished because his life ended prematurely. Oskar cannot do the work of the classic detective, which is to "reduce and avert" societal dangers via storytelling ("the concluding narration of the crime, revealing the origin of the disruption, identifying its individual agent(s), and . . . entailing the proper ending" [Hühn 464]) because he lacks the detective story's "proper ending."¹²³

¹²³ In this sense, Oskar has more in common with the "hard-boiled" detective, as Hühn describes him: "In contrast, hard-boiled detective novels seem to presuppose a reader who from the start is less optimistic

Instead, Oskar deviates from the detective's path precisely at the point where he imagines, by way of reversal, a different ending to his father's story than the one that his clues and facts dictate. The flip movie finale thus creates an ironic tension between the detective work Oskar does perform (combing the city, creating a narrative) and the detective work he ought to, but cannot, perform (closing the case and moving on). Such a refusal of the narrative closure toward which the detective story had been working undermines the exceptionalist desire for totalizing knowledge of the event evident in its final pages.¹²⁴ Counter to the Hawking-esque notion that, by imagining his father alive, Oskar has made it so, Oskar recognizes that, by telling his father's story, he has done as much as he can do. Instead of being restored to order, the world remains forever out of joint. Perhaps time runs in reverse in another universe, but not in Oskar's.

In addition to highlighting this permanent loss of order, the flipbook ending also works against exceptionalist discourse via its connection to Oskar's creation of a redemptive scientific practice. As was explored in Part Two, Oskar imagines a radical possible world in which technology only helps and never hurts. While this is an admittedly utopian vision, it counters exceptionalist discourse by imagining a world in which the United States cannot dominate via military technology, as it did in Dresden and Hiroshima.¹²⁵ Instead of the air strikes and eventual ground war that the United States

about the efficacy of interpretive skills and of curing problems by narrating their stories. Furthermore, he seems to have lost faith in the possibility of finding an objective truth and of establishing a simple order" (465).

¹²⁴ Further, as Michael notes, "Oskar has no illusions that his reversing the order of the events is more than an exercise of his imagination" (20). While Oskar finds comfort in the reversal, he understands it as fiction.

¹²⁵ Aaron Mauro reads these imaginative acts differently, stating, "[T]his impossible event of imaginative possibility provides a moment of safety and consolation for Oskar. In other words, the realization of the unthinkable—the destruction of the towers or the death of a father—sometimes necessitates a similar imagining of the impossible. . . . By some imaginative form of Brownian motion, it is at least conceivable that his father's fall could be rewound; or, perhaps a shirt of birds could lift him to safety; or, maybe a building could lower itself to the ground like an elevator" (599). Mauro seems to be reaching for a parallel

waged after 9/11 in order to reduce the likelihood of future attacks, Oskar imagines technologies that might have prevented his father's death. Oskar creates lists of imaginary inventions throughout the novel, and his final list occurs right before he imagines the reversal of his father's timeline. He thinks, "What about windmills on the roof of every skyscraper? What about a kite-string bracelet? A fishing-line bracelet? What if skyscrapers had roots? What if you had to water skyscrapers, and play classical music to them, and know if they like sun or shade? What about a teakettle?" (323). In part, this list of inventions shows that Oskar is moving past his constant obsession with his father's death. Instead of a Morse Code bracelet of his father's last words, he imagines fishing line and kite string, which gestures to both the story of the Sixth Borough and to normal childhood (and father-son) activities.¹²⁶ Likewise, the teakettle returns him to one of the novel's very first inventions, the "teakettle that reads in Dad's voice . . . or maybe a set of kettles that sings the chorus of 'Yellow Submarine'" (1). But instead of attempting to reanimate his lost father's voice, this invention is a simple teakettle, thus acknowledging the finality of that loss.

None of Oskar's inventions can undo the damage done, but they naturalize technology in such a way that it becomes something to be cared for and tended rather than harnessed and used. For example, skyscrapers topped by windmills would produce energy instead of burn it, allowing Oskar to think of the buildings as a part of the natural

universe here, but his larger point is that Oskar inhabits a very specifically fictive world, not one that could be realized. In Mauro's reading, then, Oskar hides from reality in fiction. But since Oskar identifies first as a scientist/inventor, I argue that he instead imagines a form of scientific practice that, though fantastical, could potentially be reached in spirit if not in letter.

¹²⁶ On the night before his death, Thomas tells a story that is related in a chapter called "The Sixth Borough." In that story, New York City once included a borough that gradually floats away from Manhattan, finally settling at one of the earth's poles and becoming encased in ice. But in the time before the borough is out of reach, it remains connected to Manhattan via kite strings and laces.

world instead of a threat to be managed with birdseed shirts and sideways elevators. Oskar's imaginative works create a sense of openness and possibility that contribute to the text's overall sense of positive unpredictability. That is, Oskar recaptures the word "unimaginable," removing it from the realm of destruction and creating with it a vision of a city that appears to live and breathe. Oskar's many inventions function to create an alternate version of the United States, one in which the nation's technological power contributes to the common good rather than supplies a wellspring of retaliation. The act of creating helps Oskar to work through and move past the event of his father's death even while denying that a traumatic event could ever truly end.

Yet, moving from the world of the novel to the reader's experience of the text, Foer's flip book comes under fire for seeming to trivialize the deaths of those who fell from the Towers. Several reviewers of the novel criticize not just the inclusion of the images but the fact that readers are expected to physically manipulate the falling man, returning him to some imagined world where the attacks never happened. B.R. Myers comments on the physical act of using the flipbook, writing, "when the pages are flipped through, the body looks as if it is rising. Never mind the poor taste; never mind the story about losing a father and finding a grandfather, which would elicit sneers from critics if the cover had *The Key* on it and Nicholas Sparks's name underneath. The remarkable thing is that a substantial part of the book is designed to be only glanced at" ("A Bag of Tired Tricks"). Myers specifically takes issue with the notion that an important image—that Oskar himself notes is "somebody," not his fictional father but a photo representative of actual deaths,¹²⁷ and that the American media universally agreed never to disseminate,

¹²⁷ There's some disagreement about veracity of the photo; Foer credits a "photo illustration based on a photograph by Lyle Owersko [sic] © 2001" (front matter). Lyle Owerko is a photojournalist who, like

as Oskar also notes—becomes just another of the novel’s “various diversions.” Most important to this study is Myers’ claim that “Even the most submissive readers will skim [the novel’s lengthy sections of sentence fragments], but they can at least pretend that it was meant to be taken slowly and respectfully. Not long afterward, though, is a two-page photograph of a man’s palms, one with YES written on it and the other with NO, as if the author’s verbal description of just such a pair of hands left too much to the imagination.” Myers is offended, then, by this apparent invitation to skim over some of the most important documentary photographs of that day. Walter Kirn similarly references the physical work required by the flipbook in his *New York Times* review of the novel, writing, “This is when the novel’s ideal reader is meant to riffle through the flip-book, while Oskar riffles through it in the story, and let himself, for one Peter Pan-ish moment, imagine how incredible that would be. Sept. 11 would never have happened!” (“Everything is Included”). Kirn’s “riffle” lands just a bit too close to “trifle,” connoting a sense of the flipbook as an afterthought to a weightless story of the events of September 11th. According to both Myers and Kirn, Foer’s flipbook, like the rest of the images included in the novel, encourages readers to skip over the pictures and blank spaces alike in order to get on with the rest of the story.

Against this interpretation, I would suggest that, by continually calling his readers’ attention to the careful looking and patient watching of the detective, Foer models an appropriate way of viewing the text’s images. That is, by giving the reader

Richard Drew, documented the jumpers on 9/11. However, according to Susie Linfield, “In Richard Drew’s *Falling Man* photograph, the victim appeared close-up enough for the contours of his body to be unmistakable. [Owerko’s photograph] offers a more distant view of a tiny figure juxtaposed against a massive background, the terror aestheticized but nonetheless still palpable” (“Jumpers”). By choosing to base his manipulated images on the Owerko rather than the Drew photos, Foer chooses the aestheticized over the gruesome, which is itself a debatable choice. I focus here on the physical experience of manipulating the text, however, rather than on the choice of images.

access not just to Oskar's story of the clues but also to the clues themselves, the novel provides the reader with both a method of detection and objects on which to practice that method. As journalist Susie Linfield points out, after September 12th, American media stopped showing pictures of the jumpers: "[P]hotographs of the so-called jumpers have been rendered taboo, vilified as an insult to the dead and an unbearably brutal shock to the living (though they have been printed abroad, and can be found on the Internet)" ("Jumpers"). Yet suspending the shock that reviewers exhibit at Foer's willingness to incorporate those images into his novel allows for a consideration of the reader's role as witness. According to critic Harold Schweizer's work on trauma photography, the context in which such a photograph is presented matters. He draws on a reading of Barthes' *Camera Lucida* to distinguish between the *studium* and the *punctum* of these photographs: "*Studium* enables a reading of the cultural connotations of the picture By contrast, *punctum* breaks, stings, pricks or cuts the *studium* so that in that detail or moment of rupture . . . the code of the *studium* is in question, the intention of the photographer no longer grasps the narrative of the photograph, and the language of the critic can no longer explain or describe" (25). Journalistic photography (an Owerko or Drew image of the jumpers) "neutralizes" the trauma photograph via its "attempt to bring closure via . . . narrative to these photos," resulting in a "remedying [of] the violence of wounds by the violence of closure" (30). While the photos of the jumpers almost maintain the power of the *punctum*, the presentation of those photos in various contexts can result in the reining in of that power. For example, Richard Drew's falling man photograph became the subject of Tom Junod's hunt for the man's identity ("The Falling Man," *Esquire*, September 2003). By placing the photo in the context of a magazine's

hunt for the jumper's identity—a hunt with a clear beginning and ending—Junod achieves closure by identifying one of the attacks' many unidentifiable victims.

But, as Schweizer explains, the journalistic context does more than simply attempt to move trauma photographs toward a false sense of closure: “[M]agazine covers and television demand our continual, and eventually habitual, moral absence from suffering” (32). Viewers absent themselves from the suffering on the page because the magazine or television program limits “the temporal aspect of our gaze” specifically because the act of “turning the page” means that viewers do not need to “sustain our gaze for long,” (32). The viewer thus morphs into a voyeur of suffering (32), which is what Kirn and Myers fear. In their reading, Foer's overuse of images encourages viewers to move too quickly past them instead of engaging with them, meaning that “the subversive power of the picture is always already foreclosed” (Schweizer 29). Yet, if a journalistic context can create such an experience, then it seems possible that a novelistic context might resist it.

For *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, that resistance locates itself in the detective genre. A detective story involves the reader in the formulation of its plot. Just as, according to Todorov, the detective story works as a double narrative, enclosing the telling of a mystery within the tale that solves it, Foer's novel embeds a number of mysteries (the end of Thomas's life, the renter's unknown life, grandma's strange habits) within the story of Oskar's search for the lock. Each clue asks the reader to read closely, from the pictures of doorknobs (significant to both Oskar's unwillingness to cross certain thresholds and the grandfather's sculptures done by a hand burned by grabbing a doorknob in Dresden) to the overwritten pages in which much can be still deciphered. Far

from suggesting that readers skip and rush, the detective framework asks readers to stop and linger. Even though the pages of the flipbook move quickly, the decontextualization of the traumatic photograph restores its subversive power by requiring the reader to confront the desire to turn the page. If the source of a journalistic photograph's grotesqueness is the fact that viewers can too quickly turn the page, the flipbook captures readers in the act of turning and asks them to physically remain there. Moreover, the flipbook permits the reader to participate in the act of creation alongside Oskar. Rather than simply narrating the flipbook, Foer includes the reader in the physical experience of using it, thus inviting readers into the community of creators and seekers Oskar has formed.

Foer trusts the reader to do the detective work he asks her to do, and at least some readers seem to merit that trust.¹²⁸ For example, another of the text's many mysteries is Oskar's racial identity. That Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) deeply considers the Jewish post-Holocaust experience seems, for some critics, to make it unlikely or impossible for Foer to write a non-Jewish German in World War II. Updike calls the Schell family "oddly deracinated," but others go so far as to read the text for invisible Jews to accompany Simon Goldberg, an intellectual who was kept safe for a short time by the Schell family in Dresden. Searching for the text's hidden Jews, Philippe Codde describes his attempt to decode one of the grandfather's messages to the grandmother, writing, "I cannot claim even to have tried to decode the entire two and a half pages of numerical code (has anyone?), the few sentences in the beginning yield interesting results. . . . The name he gives himself is definitely not Thomas Schell (the best I can

¹²⁸ It should be noted that Foer happens to be a polarizing figure among the young/male/intellectual/New York set of contemporary writers, so it is not so much that readers like Kirn and Myers are "bad readers" as that they demonstrate an unwillingness to trust or indulge Foer.

come up with is 'Elie Blum'), which may indicate that Thomas changed his name after the war when he emigrated to the United States. . . . If the coded name is indeed supposed to be Elie Blum, this creates entirely new and suggestive layers of meaning leading to dizzying effects, sending the reader on a speculative quest for the "real" but unrevealed past by Foer. . . . [W]as Thomas a Jew who escaped the fate of Simon Goldberg . . . [o]r is the 'Elie Blum' name a fake one, which the German Thomas adopts after the war, out of guilt for what happened to the Jews?" (253). Ilka Saal takes Codde's discussion further, writing that Codde's "discovery" of "Elie Blum" in the numerical code strongly connects the novel's characters to those in *Everything is Illuminated*: "Here, a narrator's fervently anti-Semitic grandfather (named Alexander Pechov) turns out to be a Jew who had been forced to betray other Jews in order to save his own life. Significantly, his name was also Eli. On the basis of this analogy we might surmise that 'Elie Blum' is Schell's real name, which he abandoned in order to escape Nazi Germany. But we might just as well assume that Blum is a mere pseudonym, which Schell adopts out of a sense of guilt toward his former Jewish neighbor. The novel refuses to give us answers to such speculative questions, prompting us to wonder whether the name is meant to make any sense at all" (468-69). The Elie/Thomas puzzle equally frustrates and intrigues both Codde and Saal, who admit that their speculation cannot end in any kind of definitive reading of the text.

Yet even such a moment of exasperation can be productive in terms of the novel's larger project: *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* carefully considers the process of knowledge production and possession, from Oskar's need to uncover the story of his father's death to aspects of that knowledge, like the photos of the jumpers, that are not

permitted to be shown. As such, by including indecipherable codes and overwritten text, the novel resists exceptionalist discourse by maintaining that certain aspects of a disaster remain unknowable and unsubsumable. Further, as the above readings by Codde and Saal demonstrate, a determined, if ultimately unfinished, close reading represents what it means to engage, slowly and carefully, with the text's many puzzles, codes, pictures, clues, and absences. To attempt to decode almost three pages of numerical strings requires a willingness to move slowly through the text instead of skimming quickly over these odd, textually significant but readerly insignificant pages. As Codde explains, "The reader is equally frustrated by undecipherable, coded messages that presumably reveal something about a past that has really become inaccessible" (253). Quite significantly, Foer manages to create, through these images, an experience of a frustrated, endless, potentially fruitless search. For the reader, there is no answer key for the grandfather's numerical code; his message cannot be known. Likewise, for Oskar, there can be a reading, an interpretation, of his father's last moments based on the facts he has, but he cannot truly *know*. His detective's journey allows him to arrive at an interpretation of his father's last moments, just as the coded text allows Codde to arrive at "Elie Blum," but these concomitant searches cannot definitively answer many of Oskar's or the reader's questions.

What Foer suggests, then, is that what matters most is the effort, the willingness to show up and do the work of reading despite the fact that it cannot possibly satisfy the reader's desire for answers and closure—indeed, should not satisfy that desire and instead must resist that desire. Oskar says that what matters is one's ability to say, "I tried incredibly hard. I don't know how I could have tried harder" (323). Performing the work

of close reading thus becomes a form of “traumatic reading” that complements Dori Laub’s concept of “traumatic listening”: “The listener . . . is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. . . . The listener to trauma needs . . . to be a guide and an explorer, a companion in a journey onto an uncharted land, a journey the survivor cannot traverse or return from alone” (57-58). Oskar is such a person for whom the pieces of the story of a traumatic event cannot be made to mean anything, and he requires the aid of many listeners along the way before he can finally tell the story of his father’s death. As Laub explains, “While historical evidence to the event which constitutes the trauma may be abundant and documents in vast supply, the trauma - as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock - has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of” (58). By signaling a willingness to explore those pieces alongside Oskar, and, in the detective tradition to try to assemble them, the reader joins him in a “contingent search for knowledge” (Huehls 92).¹²⁹ This search is instructive in that it allows the reader to practice the work of the ethical witness in a safe space, a laboratory of sorts, in which she can figure out how to sit with traumatic silence, to acknowledge what cannot be known or understood, and to become comfortable with the lack of closure that such a narrative entails.

¹²⁹ Similarly, Birgit Dawes argues that the novel’s images and overstrikes “interactively invite the reader’s response into their multiple epistemological layers and thus interfere with any linear or hierarchical construction of meaning” (534).

Chapter Four

“Whatever it was, it wasn’t human!”: Manufacturing Identity in *The Colossus of New York* (2003)

The supreme question which confronts our generation today — the question to which all other problems are merely corollaries — is whether our technology can be brought under control. Is man to be the master of the destructive energies he has created, or is he to be their victim? Will this physical power which he already possesses and these new forces which are now within his grasp be employed to serve the race in constructive ways, or will they be a Frankenstein monster that will slay its own maker? In brief, has man the wisdom and the ethical and spiritual powers to control the forces which he has himself let loose? If science were standing still, if no new powers were to be added to those already in man's possession the problem might eventually find a solution. But, of course, the idea is fanciful. We are merely at the beginning of progress in our technologies. New powers and weapons are just around the corner, powers and weapons which the utmost wisdom could scarcely be trusted to use aright — airplanes larger and more deadly than those now employed, explosives capable of far-flung destruction beyond anything we dream of at the moment.¹³⁰

As I explore in Chapter Three, Jonathan Safran Foer creates an evidence-heavy novel that catalogues Oskar’s quest for an explanatory narrative of his father’s death. Oskar’s inclusion of *Stuff That Happened To Me*, a scrapbook filled with the results of his many Internet searches, provides the documentation that connects a fictional character to the real world that he (and readers) inhabit. In some ways, Oskar acts as a one-person 9/11 Commission, gathering all existing evidence of the event in order to weave it into an understandable narrative. Within the texts in this study, a tension exists between the desire for a totalizing knowledge of the event and the realization that such knowledge is at best unattainable. Chapter One’s discussion of post-9/11 surveillance demonstrates that, at worst, knowledge-gathering can reach monstrous proportions out of scale with American ideals of privacy and autonomy. The growth of large-scale defense and surveillance systems after the attacks thus invites authors and readers alike to question the aims and limits of the nation’s technological pursuits.

¹³⁰ *The Rockefeller Foundation Annual Report 1943* (26-7).

From its allusions to 1950s science fiction to its examination of the intricate human and non-human machines that keep New York City alive, Colson Whitehead's *The Colossus of New York* directly engages questions of the nation's status as a technological superpower in the context of a meditation on a beloved city. In his published writing, Whitehead has created a particularly autobiographical body of work, weaving segments of his own life story into fictional texts that range from the realistic to the fantastic. Central to much of his work are two preoccupations: his lifelong home of New York City, and science fiction and horror films. Of his five novels (not including *Colossus*, which is officially classed as a travelogue), three are set in New York. B-movies, meanwhile, range from tangential to arguably central importance in his work. *Sag Harbor's* Benji mentions an interest in *Fangoria* magazine, *Dungeons and Dragons*, and the *Road Warrior* movies, while *Zone One*, Whitehead's "high-brow zombie novel," engages the trope of the monster apocalypse. Following the publication of *Zone One*, Whitehead details his devotion to the films he terms "psychotronic" in a 2012 essay, "A Psychotronic Childhood: Learning from B-Movies." He offers his own definition of the genre: "*Psychotronic* films range from sincere social commentary to degrading trash. They concern teenagers, rock 'n' roll, juvenile delinquents, monsters, aliens, killers, spies, detectives, bikers, communists, drugs, natural catastrophes, atomic bombs, the prehistoric past, and the projected future. . . . They exploited cultural trends and fads, and buried cultural trends and fads with the shoddy facts of themselves" ("Psychotronic"). The term psychotronic thus encompasses a large body of films that saw their popularity rise in the 1950s. Though the "shoddy facts of themselves" certainly reduced the immediate cultural impact of the B-movie, many of the films address post-World War II

anxieties about both politics and science, including the growth of information technology, bioengineering, military industrial technology, and atomic science.

Whitehead's 2003 *The Colossus of New York*, a collection of thirteen loosely-connected essays focused on both iconic and obscure New York experiences, borrows its title from one such B-movie. The film updates the Frankenstein story for the 20th century, placing the brain of a dead scientist, Jeremy Spensser, into the body of an outlandishly large robot created by his brother, Henry, at the urging of their father. Jeremy's father, a brain surgeon, insists that Jeremy's genius must be preserved so that his work, a specifically humanitarian application of industrial science, can continue. However, because this is both a B-movie and a Frankenstein story, the technology that preserves Jeremy's brain ultimately reaches unpredicted and unintended consequences. "Robot Jeremy" gradually morphs from humanitarian into evil killer, presumably because, like Frankenstein's monster, he exists as a creature outside of society. Robot Jeremy kills his brother and begins an attack on the United Nations headquarters in New York but is stopped by his human son, Billy, who throws the robot's kill switch.

Unlike *Zone One*, which overtly engages the zombie subgenre, or even *Sag Harbor*, whose semi-autobiographical version of Whitehead, Benji, consumes such texts, *Colossus* (2003) only refers to Whitehead's "psychotronic childhood" through its title. Yet the essays explore the question at the heart of both highbrow and lowbrow science fiction, namely, what becomes of an invention once it is created? Specifically, *The Colossus of New York* (2003) examines how New York City is itself a Frankenstein monster, quickly slipping the grasp of its creators to take on a life of its own. Whitehead questions not whether limits should be placed on technological advances but, instead,

what New Yorkers become in the hands of the monster they have created. While Whitehead's unmistakably loves New York City, he creates an image of New York as factory that consumes individuals and manufactures them into seemingly identical "New Yorkers." While the personified New York maintains selfhood and awareness, those who inhabit the city appear almost robotic in Whitehead's descriptions of their day-to-day lives. As New Yorkers become over-identified with the city, the looming specter of its potential destruction gradually takes on more significance. If one's personality and identity becomes subsumed under that of the city (if one literally loses oneself in New York), then, as Whitehead writes, "When the buildings fall, we topple, too" (9).

However, Whitehead gradually moves toward an alternative to the version of New York he first creates by reading the dreaded choices and changes as a part of the natural evolution of the city. Structurally, the thirteen chapters of *Colossus* are divided into two halves by the "Broadway" chapter, the placement of the chapter mimicking the manner in which the referenced street bisects the city. The essays begin as a study of impending doom, a series of nods and gestures to a horrifying event (9/11) that remains unnamed, but they end as an attempt to reread the unnamed event—both the technology that enabled it and the changes it caused—as symptomatic of an inevitable, value-neutral experience of technological progress. An undeniable undercurrent of fear permeates the text: like a B-movie where the monster is never quite made visible, the text's pervasive disquiet centers on the very human fear of provisionality, of the unknowable mistake or misstep that starts one down a path to destruction, what Whitehead calls, "Every day's essential either-orness Whole possibilities canceled by this first mistake" (*Colossus* 37). To battle this monster, the text offers a series of geologic metaphors, suggesting that

the sense of provisionality, unpredictability, and loss of control in the text can be read in terms of the evolution of the city and the selves that inhabit it.

In this chapter, I first discuss Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the thematic precursor of texts that, broadly speaking, question the role of technology in society. I then read the 1958 *Colossus* in order to contextualize Whitehead's essays, arguing that Whitehead makes the film's central concern, an invention gone out-of-control, his own. The 1920 German film *Der Golem* also informs my discussion of Whitehead's work by enabling a discussion of the United States' technological supremacy in the context of uncanny images of destruction. *Colossus* (2003), I argue, meditates on the relationship between humans, the technologies they create, and the technologies that in turn make and unmake them. The 9/11 texts addressed in this study tease out the relationship between the United States and the science it creates as well as the ways in which technological supremacy forms the basis of a national exceptionalist discourse. *Colossus* specifically addresses challenges to the technological arm of exceptionalist discourse by exploring how the nation inevitably loses control of its inventions. This rhetorical move simultaneously undercuts and shores up exceptionalist discourse: while acknowledging that the nation never has the final say in how its technologies are employed, *The Colossus of New York* (2003) nevertheless stabilizes that loss of control by providing a framework that allows it to be read as natural.

Frankenstein Stories

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or Prometheus Unbound* (1818) is central to the study of the intersection of literature and science. Like the monster her protagonist

stitches together, Shelley endeavors to build her fiction on solid fact, to faithfully imagine the consequences of the experiments carried out “by [Erasmus] Darwin, and some of the physiological writers of Germany”(“Preface” 47). Darwin’s theory of vitalism holds that life could be spontaneously, asexually created by some “spark of life”; Shelley uses this principle to account for the animation of Frankenstein’s monster (“Introduction” 12). However, Percy Shelley’s Preface to the 1818 edition exhibits an anxiety related to the difficult line walked by science fiction writers who insist that their works, though frightening, are not “a series of supernatural terrors” (47). The Preface goes to war with itself, as P.B. Shelley by turns claims not to “[accord] the remotest degree of serious faith to such an imagination” (47) and at the same time to hold the story “exempt from the disadvantages of a mere tale of spectres or enchantment” (47). P.B. Shelley thus expresses the notion that the fiction of science fiction cannot help but undermine the text’s faithful representation of the theories on which it is based, and in so doing introduces the problem of the genre’s struggle for legitimacy. While *Frankenstein* is not science fiction in a contemporary sense, it does act as an ur-text for the genre by inventing some of the genre’s common tropes (e.g. oversized monsters on a rampage) as well as critiquing the role of science in modern society.

Very broadly, Shelley’s novel considers the limits a responsible scientist ought to place on the pursuit of imagined creations. Before attending university, Frankenstein studies “the masters of science,” Magnus, Agrippa, and Paracelsus, who “sought immortality and power” (75). Though he admits that the classical sciences he studied were “futile,” he is nonetheless dismayed by their modern replacements, finding that “[t]he ambition of the inquirer seemed to limit itself to the annihilation of those visions

on which my interest in science was chiefly founded” (75). Frankenstein thus places at odds imagination and science, lamenting, “I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth” (75). Waldman, Frankenstein’s mentor, attempts to reverse Frankenstein’s easy condemnation of modern science, telling him, ““The ancient teachers . . . promised impossibilities, and performed nothing. The modern masters promise very little But these philosophers . . . have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew [sic] how she works in her hiding places”” (76). In this moment that foreshadows Frankenstein’s eventual attempts at reproduction *sui generis*, Waldman fails to dissuade Frankenstein from the alchemist’s path. Instead, he merely increases Frankenstein’s ambitions when he says, ““[Modern scientists] have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world”” (76). While Waldman very clearly insists that the work of the ancient scientists was “erroneously directed” (77) and, most importantly, that “A man would make but a very sorry chemist, if he attended to that department of human knowledge alone,” (77), Frankenstein immediately seizes upon chemistry as “nearly [his] sole occupation” (77).

Shelley’s first criticism of science concerns the figure of the monomaniacal researcher, the man (never woman) who abandons all life outside the lab. Frankenstein forsakes his home in Geneva for Bavaria, entranced by “the enticements of science” (78). He is quite pointedly “engaged, heart and soul, in the pursuit of some discoveries” (78), an image that gestures toward an unnatural marriage between the scientist and his work that will eventually produce unnatural progeny. The “one object of pursuit” in which Frankenstein is “solely wrapt up” (78) against Waldman’s advice leads Frankenstein to

inquire after “the principle of life” (79). Shelley makes it clear that Frankenstein goes about his study *the wrong way*. The problem here is not what Frankenstein asks (what is the spark of life?) but how he conducts his research: in isolation and in secret, without conversation or community.¹³¹ When Frankenstein finally discovers “the cause of generation of life,” he does so in an apparent act of asexual conception (though one still marked by “delight and rapture” [80]): “After so much time spent in painful labour, to arrive at once at the summit of my desires, was the most gratifying consummation of my toils” (80). Frankenstein thus conceives of the method by which to create life, but in recounting the tale to Walton he refuses to share what he has discovered, insisting “how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world” (81). This is the text’s first Promethean moment, though Frankenstein clearly suffers less from an excess of ambition than from a dearth of community. Moreover, this failure to pursue his research in conjunction with Waldman also represents bad scientific practice. In isolation, Frankenstein has no one with whom to discuss his theories, experimentation, and results. Although he thinks briefly of implications for further research (“I was encouraged to hope my present attempts would at least lay the foundations of future success” [81]), his current work suffers from the absence of, in modern terms, peer review. For example, in choosing to create a new being from scavenged corpses, he finds that “the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed” (81). In addition to working too quickly and without proper reflection, he solves the problem of scale by creating a “being of gigantic

¹³¹ Frankenstein’s hunchbacked assistant Igor (or Fritz) is a filmic invention, appearing for the first time in the 1931 Universal Pictures adaptation of the novel. In addition to Igor, Frankenstein assembles a small crowd (including one woman) to witness the animation of the creature.

stature; that is to say, about eight feet in height, and proportionally large” (81). Here Shelley begins a now long tradition of oversized monsters created by mad scientists whose madness and mistakes can be attributed to their isolation.

Shelley’s second criticism of science stems from the first: working in isolation, the scientist fails to take responsibility for, or even to imagine, the implications of his research. Having animated the form he has assembled, Frankenstein acts as if he is seeing his work for the first time and moreover, he is completely surprised by what he has created. Looking with fear and anguish at the face of the creature he made himself, he thinks, “the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (85). Now alive, the creature very briefly takes on the role of the companion Frankenstein had lacked, and this brief moment of community allows him to see that the fault in his work was “an ardour that far exceeded moderation” (85). However, instead of confronting the implications of his work, he runs away and subsequently falls ill. Throughout his illness, he tells no one of the work he has done, and, when he finally returns to the university, he aims to avoid his seemingly failed experiment entirely, saying that he “had conceived a violent antipathy even to the name of natural philosophy” (95). Frankenstein gladly accepts the disappearance of the monster without worrying about where it might be. Instead, he basks in the company of his friend, Clerval, whose arrival at Ingolstadt reverses the effects of the previous years of study in isolation.

Yet Clerval’s companionship cannot undo what Frankenstein’s bad science has already done, which is to release an invention into the world without accounting for its effect on society. As the monster explains, “You had endowed me with perceptions and passions, and then cast me abroad an object for the scorn and horror of mankind” (164).

For Frankenstein's monster, the key problem is that he cannot find a place in the community in which he has been unthinkingly abandoned. Given no purpose by Frankenstein, the creature is a useless invention until he figures out for himself how his abilities might benefit the DeLacey family, whose company he seeks. He reads *Paradise Lost* and observes how the family interacts, and, through the process of reading and observation, he learns what companionship is, and how he might be of use: "I discovered also another means through which I was enabled to assist their labours. . . . [D]uring the night, I often took his tools, the use of which I quickly discovered, and brought home firing sufficient for the consumption of several days" (137). Here the monster is part man, part machine; his great strength enables him to perform easily what would be a difficult task for the family. Yet, because he is also part man, he wants more than to be a tool. He wants the family's companionship, that they might save him from being "an unfortunate and deserted creature" with "no relation or friend upon earth" (158). He cannot have this, of course. Rejected utterly by the DeLaceys, who abandon him and flee the region, the creature decides that he must instead find Frankenstein, to demand of him the creation of a companion (a request that becomes the origin story for 20th-century "Bride of Frankenstein" tales).

Frankenstein denies the monster's request primarily because he fears that the monster and his female companion might reproduce. Denied a companion, the monster tells Frankenstein, "'Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you'" (192). Having failed to either reflect on the ramifications of his creative act or imagine for it a context in which it might be useful (or at least rendered powerless)—having failed, that is, to

control his experiment—Frankenstein finds himself under the monster’s control. The creature has already killed Frankenstein’s brother, William. Justine, the family’s maid, is hung for the death. He also kills Clerval, whose death finally brings Frankenstein to fully lament the unintended outcomes of his research and experimentation: “Clerval, my friend and dearest companion, had fallen a victim to me and the monster of my creation,” whose existence was owed to the “mad enthusiasm that hurried me on to the creation of my hideous enemy” (207). Frankenstein recognizes all of the points at which his good science has gone bad: he has created a human-like being who cannot hope to enjoy the company of humans but who has no other company, and he failed to see the implications of this creations because, in his “mad enthusiasm,” he thought only of achieving his goal and not of what might happen in the aftermath.

For Frankenstein, that aftermath entails the quick dissolution of his entire community. The monster kills his intended, Elizabeth, which leaves Frankenstein’s father to die in a fit of grief. Frankenstein is thus driven to live the life he created for the monster, wandering alone through “deserts and barbarous countries” (223) and following the creature finally to the Arctic, where he loses sight of him and later is found, drifting on an ice floe, by Walton. In recounting the tale of the monster’s creation to Walton, however, Frankenstein does not find his “past conduct” “blameable” (238). Although he again recognizes the “enthusiastic madness” in which he created the monster, he still sees his scientific work as having “extensive utility to [his] fellow-creatures” (234). Moreover, he assigns his fault not to the “union” of the imagined creation and the “powers of analysis and application” (233) that allowed him to successfully create what he had imagined but to the fact that his obligation to the creature’s “happiness and well-being”

could not surpass his obligation to keep the community safe from the monster, and more specifically, the monster's desire for a mate (238). His final words to Walton are to "avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed" (239). Here Frankenstein seems to have it half-right. The act of creation, as a purely scientific act, was not the source of his wrongdoing. Rather, it was in failing to imagine what came next: the monster's capacity for reason and emotion, his desire for an equal, Frankenstein's refusal to fulfill that desire, and his ultimate ruin at the hands of his creation.

From Shelley's insistence on both the singular importance of a scientific community of practice and the need for scientists to consider the effects of the technologies they create, Shelley's third criticism of science emerges: the necessity for the community to likewise open itself to scientific progress. While the burden of blame falls on Frankenstein for his failure to anticipate the rejection of the monster by the community—a possibility he may have at least considered had he not been consumed by his "mad enthusiasm"—society too deserves some blame for fearing rather than attempting to accept Frankenstein's creation. Shelley was strongly influenced by William Godwin's *Political Justice* ("Introduction" 12), in which he argues that the advent of machinery would lead to the end of human cooperation. Yet the characterization of the monster runs somewhat counter to Godwin's prediction. As a piece of technology, the monster does the more difficult work around the DeLacey cabin, allowing the family more time to labor together at less grueling tasks. But, for their community to exist, the monster must remain outside it; the very aspects that make the monster a good machine

(size, strength, speed) make him a fearful human. Admittedly, the DeLaceys had no idea they were benefitting from the monster's work; the surprise of finding him in their home, with their blind father, was their only, unfortunate introduction to him. In contrast, Walton is just as surprised and frightened by the monster's "loathsome, yet appalling hideousness" (240) but benefits from having heard Frankenstein's tale. That is, he has been prepared for what he is about to see and, while he too has difficulty accepting the monster (in no small part because the monster has murdered nearly everyone he has ever known), he can at least converse with him. Walton is in fact the only (sighted) person besides Frankenstein with whom the monster carries on a conversation, a point that underscores Frankenstein's failure to prepare the community to receive his invention.

Like the experimental sciences (electricity, reproduction) it explores, the textual *Frankenstein* rather beautifully takes on a life of its own, offering a metaphor for rogue technology that is broad enough to be reworked across various media well into the 21st century. In contemporary usage, the term "Frankensteinian" is often used whenever one means to express fear regarding an untested technological advancement (Ziolkowski 34). And, while adaptations of Shelley's novel and remakes of the 1930s horror films still circulate widely in popular culture, it is just as common to see the scientific community debating its own Frankenstein status, especially on very Shelley-like topics such as cloning and artificial reproduction. In a response to then-President Bill Clinton's 1998 address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in which Clinton urged "that science serves humanity, and not the other way around," AAAS president Mildred Dresselhaus writes, "This disquieting sentiment—that science, like Dr. Frankenstein's monster, is poised to wreak havoc on its creator—has a currency today

that should alarm us as scientists” (“What Scientists Can Do to Fight the Frankenstein Myth”). Dresselhaus goes on to argue for an open sharing of knowledge in which scientists and the community meet each other halfway. To create “an atmosphere of hope and trust rather than suspicion and fear,” she advocates for the creation of open forums among scientists and nonscientists by means of which those conducting research can “have some responsibility for how science is interpreted by the public.” Most importantly, since “many scientific achievements cannot be anticipated or planned for in a strategic way” and because “scientists need to retain the freedom to follow hunches,” Dresselhaus claims that “direct action” should be practiced by scientists in order to encourage the growth of public trust prior to the introduction of new technologies into society. In essence, Dresselhaus aims to change attitudes toward scientific discoveries by fostering an open dialogue and by considering the public as an extension of the scientific community, recommendations that seem to heed Shelley’s warnings.

Reading the cultural descendants of *Frankenstein* reveals that the public’s fear of scientific discoveries and new technologies remains despite attempts on the part of the scientific community to allay them. If anything, the last decade has seen a growing mistrust of science, especially the biomedical industry, as anti-vaccine and related movements undermine what has heretofore been considered accepted and trusted socio-medical practice. In the following sections, I will trace how *The Colossus of New York* (1958) adapts the Frankenstein story before exploring how Whitehead’s *Colossus* treats Frankensteinian fears of technology in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001.

Mad Robots¹³² and Killer Scientists: *The Colossus of New York* (1958)

The Colossus of New York (1958), directed by Eugène Lourié, questions the limits humans are capable of placing on technologies that seem always on the brink of slipping out of control. The story opens with a newsreel report on Dr. Jeremy Spensser's latest invention. The newsreel's narrator exclaims, "Here, in today's modern bakeries, automation will reach an even higher degree of efficiency through the use of Dr. Spensser's revolutionary heat-sensing device." While the exact nature of Jeremy's invention is never explained (it seems his "heat-sensing device" would uncover new areas of the planet that could be used to grow food, thus putting an end to famine), Jeremy clearly intends for his machine to serve a humanitarian end. Yet the decided tension between science (even "good" science) and the people it serves emerges in the first few minutes of the film, when Jeremy's father jokes, "You create any more like this, you'll put the human race out of business," and his son says, "I wanna see the machine that works like a man!" Here Jeremy's father expresses a common fear regarding automated labor: while meant to make life easier, it does so by literally replacing human workers with machines.¹³³ Jeremy wins a Nobel Prize for his work but dies¹³⁴ before he can accept it, at which point the B-movie tropes begin in earnest. Jeremy's father, William, a brain

¹³² To be technically accurate, Robot Jeremy is not a robot at all, but a cyborg. Robots contain no human parts; cyborgs are a blend of biomatter and synthetics. However, since the term "cyborg" was not created until 1960, I use the more general "robot" here. See Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, "Cyborgs and Space," *Astronautics* (September 1960): 26-27, 74-76, Print.

¹³³ William Godwin expresses exactly this fear in *Political Justice*, writing, "At present, to pull down a tree . . . require[s] the labour of many. Will they always require the labour of many? When we recollect the complicated machines of human contrivance . . . are we not astonished at the compendium of labour they produce? Who shall say where this species of improvement must stop? At present, such inventions alarm the labouring part of the community; and they may be productive of temporary distress, though they conduce, in the sequel, to the most important interests of the multitude" (245).

¹³⁴ Specifically, he is hit by a truck after darting into the street to retrieve his son's toy airplane. The airplane reappears later in the film, when Robot Jeremy meets his son in the woods and returns the plane to him. Billy draws out the robot's kindest, most human impulses.

surgeon, and his brother Henry, an automation engineer, form with Jeremy a triumvirate of modern scientific power. It would appear, in fact, that Jeremy acts as the brains (pun intended) to Henry's brawn, the thinker who imagines the world-saving machines that Henry then builds. In the film's clearest nod to *Frankenstein*, William feverishly works in his lab to save Jeremy's brain. Significantly, William is alone, behind a barred door. He tells no one of his plans for Jeremy's remains until the preservation of the brain is complete.

William wishes to take Jeremy's research in automation to the extreme by replacing his broken body with an indestructible robot that would house, and be controlled by, Jeremy's preserved brain. The film thus acknowledges the smudging of the line between man and machine and, like *Frankenstein*, asks whether an artificially produced being should still be considered "human." Henry resists William's urgings, calling the project "inhuman." This sentiment echoes an earlier conversation between William and his colleague, Carrington, who says, "Any brain divorced from human experience must become dehumanized to the point of monstrosity." Carrington argues that a brain alone does not make a "human," but rather that the brain, body, and soul work together to create a balanced mind. Specifically, Carrington argues that sensory experience—the interplay of the brain and body—humanizes the self and that, without that interplay, the brain would in fact be more machine-like than human. William, however, will not be denied. According to his scale of genius (earlier in the film, he claims that primitive genius serves itself, "mid-level" geniuses work on behalf of family and community, and Jeremy's type of genius uses its power to benefit all of humankind), Jeremy's ideas are too consequential to society and so must be saved.

Not surprisingly, Carrington's prediction turns out to be true. Robbed of his body, Jeremy's superior genius devolves to serve his baser instincts. Like Frankenstein's monster, Jeremy is mortified by the shell in which his brain is now housed, an eight-foot tall mess of steel with mesh eyes, stiff limbs, and leaden feet. He asks his father and brother to "turn off the machine" and end his life, but his father refuses and tries to convince Jeremy to remain in the lab, where he would, ostensibly, labor on in solitary confinement to research and develop world-saving technologies. As Carrington has predicted, however, Jeremy quite literally uses his powers for evil instead of good. He develops the ability to control minds, and he uses this power to trap and kill his brother (another nod to *Frankenstein's* killing of Henry Clerval), whom he suspects of courting his widow. William's experiment thus backfires twice-over: Jeremy first gives up his humanitarian work in favor of acting on his monstrous rage, and he then utilizes the same heat-sensing ray that was meant to save lives as a killer death ray that vaporizes its victims on contact. Robot Jeremy retains shreds of his humanity only in interactions with his son, Billy. The child evokes Jeremy's tender memories of his human life, but even this is not enough to stop what would now be called Jeremy's terrorist act, his attack on the United Nations. Jeremy's family has gathered at the UN building with a group of scientists and dignitaries for a meeting of the World Food Congress, where Jeremy's life is to be celebrated. As the proceedings get underway, Jeremy breaks through a wall of glass and begins to vaporize people. In a complete reversal of the intended use of his device, he uses the technology he has developed to kill instead of to save.

The film is heavy-handed up until the ending, at which point it unleashes the fist of straightforward discussion (and while I discuss the film as a whole seriously, I do so

with tongue firmly in cheek).¹³⁵ While Jeremy mows down humans in what would most certainly be termed a terrorist attack today, the camera shows an inscription on the wall of the UN that reads, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war any more.”¹³⁶ Thus, at the World Food Congress in the United Nations building, Jeremy shapes his heat ray into a death ray and unthinkingly kills his friends and colleagues. He justifies the killings by condemning his former viewpoint, asking, “Why create food for the maimed and the useless and the sick? Why should we work to preserve slum people of the world? Isn’t it simpler and wiser to get rid of them instead? Unfortunately there are so-called humanitarian scientists, and I am one of them, who tried to keep human trash alive. It will be necessary to get rid of those humanitarians first. . . . We must eliminate the idealists.” It would appear that of these humanitarians Jeremy was the first to die, but his very human feelings for his son still remain. In the midst of this killing spree, he sees Billy in the crowd, screaming that he hates the monster. This prompts Jeremy to show Billy his kill switch, which Jeremy cannot flip himself (lacking the all-important dexterity of human fingers). Billy turns the machine off and the light behind the mesh eyes flickers away. William and Carrington, both in attendance at the ceremony, reflect on this ending that they had not imagined for Jeremy. William admits, “You were right Carrington. Without a soul, there’s nothing but monstrosity. I only wish that heaven

¹³⁵ *The Colossus of New York* (1958) is far from what one would consider a “good” film; I attend to it here because it illuminates the intersection of science, science fiction, and the self in Whitehead’s text. Films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *The War of the Worlds* (1953) are considered finer examples of the genre. For related fiction, see Daniel Dinello’s discussion of killer robots in literature (*Technophobia* 58-86).

¹³⁶ The film represents both the text and the look of the wall faithfully but omits that the quote comes from Isaiah (the attribution is listed on the real wall).

and Jeremy could forgive me for what I did.” With this declaration, the remaining cast walks away as the camera zooms onto the blood that has leaked from Jeremy’s brain and pools next to the robot’s darkened face.

Besides making obvious references to certain names and plot points in *Frankenstein*, *Colossus* the film shares in Shelley’s critique of science, specifically with questions regarding the uncertain ramifications of new and supposedly beneficial inventions. Critic Daniel Dinello points out that it is typical of science fiction films to adapt Shelley’s work to comment on modern technology: “Frankenstein—with its technophobic projection of an artificial human—also crystallizes troubling posthuman issues that center around robots, androids, cyborgs, clones, nanobots, and the genetic technology that engineers” (43). Like Frankenstein, William works alone in his lab, having made a decision—without community or conversation—that the preservation of Jeremy’s brain would benefit society. And as was the case in *Frankenstein*, William could not predict that someone as devoted to humanitarian work as Jeremy was would change so drastically (though presumably his earlier conversations with Carrington, and the fact that he was even considering the ethical implications of automation, ought to have influenced his choice). Meanwhile, Robot Jeremy, like Shelley’s monster, hates the life he has been given and chooses to be destroyed rather than to continue to kill others (though the monster expresses far more regret for his actions against Frankenstein than Jeremy does for the murders he has committed).

However, *Colossus* seems to take a more strongly anti-science position than does Shelley. As critic Kim Hammond argues, “Shelley presents us with a ‘being’ made monstrous, but not by his ‘unnaturalness’ nor because Victor somehow transgresses

natural or God-given boundaries, but rather because Victor abandons the creature, unequipped, to a hostile world, taking no responsibility for his work” (186). For Shelley, the clearest blame lies not on the technology. The monster is an achievement, not a sin against God or nature, and he could have reached his full potential had the community been prepared to receive him (and had Frankenstein’s scientific method been a bit sharper). In that sense, *Frankenstein* more fully reflects the challenges posed to new science by reluctant “late adopters” who object out-of-hand to new developments. *Colossus* offers a much clearer indictment against William that hinges not on community or method but on the concept of a soul. By claiming that “without a soul, there’s nothing but monstrosity,” William invokes a barrier to progress that cannot be surmounted. Scientists can manufacture life, but they cannot manufacture spirits. As Susan Sontag notes in her 1965 essay “Imagination of Disaster,” “The science fiction films are strongly moralistic. The standard message is the one about the proper, or humane, uses of science, versus the mad, obsessional use of science” (45). Like the films surveyed by Sontag, *Colossus* strongly cautions against new technologies through an appeal to a higher power. This trend for moralism in sci-fi only lends credence to Shelley’s fear that communities often reject new technologies based on unwarranted but nonetheless unanswerable fears.

Colossus thus participates in the larger B-movie project of offering commentary on the potential misuse of industrial technology.¹³⁷ The film focuses on two inventions: the heat-sensing device that Jeremy creates to reduce global famine (and that he later uses to kill people), and the robot William and Henry build to house Jeremy's brain. In both cases, technologies designed to benefit humanity have the opposite effect. Writing specifically about *Colossus* (which otherwise receives very little critical attention), Dinello explains, "the movie [suggests] that Jeremy's capacity for evil— his dehumanization— not only results from his lack of organic body, but might be implicit in his pre-cyborg, techno-utopian scientific endeavors. His food-producing automata may end world hunger, but may also replace humanity" (123). Just as no one predicted the heat-ray to death-ray adaptation, the corruption of Jeremy's brain via his robot body becomes another unintended but unavoidable consequence of his work. Films expressing anxiety over the increasing automation of society form a small but vocal undercurrent in cinema. Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), though not a work of science fiction, thinks through the effect of industrial technology on laborers who unwittingly become

¹³⁷ A brief look at the short-lived B-movie tradition in England brings the American tradition into relief. The trend was less popular and shorter-lived in the United Kingdom, the subject of Ian Conrich's study, "Trashing London: The British Colossal Creature Film and Fantasies of Mass Destruction," *British Science Fiction Cinema*, Ed. I.Q. Hunter, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 88-99, Print. He argues that the attacks on London in monster movies like *Gorgo* (1961, also directed by Lourié) represent a working through of the real fears created by the destruction of the urban landscape during World War II. As Conrich explains, the 1950s saw an explosion of "colossal creature" films, especially in the United States (88). For the British, "On the one hand . . . colossal creature films can be read as metaphorical representations of a fear of modern warfare and the atomic threat. On the other, like so many other British science fiction films, they look back to the wartime terror of the Blitz" (96). In part because they actually saw parts of their major cities destroyed, the British both needed and shied away from the representation of destruction in film. But, in the United States, with the exception of Pearl Harbor (itself an exotic and military site located in a not-yet-state), no part of the landscape was subject to direct attack, a fact that would remain true until September 11th. Lacking substantive damage on which to reflect, then, science fiction films in the United States shift their gaze to the looming, invisible threats posed by postwar atomic and industrial science.

components of the machines they operate. Fritz Lang likewise addresses the effects of industry on the working class in *Metropolis* (1920).

After World War II, the criticism of technologized life shifts from class struggle to considerations of the individual and of what it means to be human. That is, having accepted that new technologies make laboring easier, new questions center on the source of self-definition for a society increasingly isolated from its work (and from each other). Sontag argues that “The theme of depersonalization (being ‘taken over’) . . . is a new allegory reflecting the age old awareness of man that, sane, he is always perilously close to insanity and unreason. But there is something more here than just . . . anxiety about his sanity. The image derives most of its power from a supplementary and historical anxiety . . . about the depersonalizing conditions of modern urban society” (48). Here Sontag refers to the “body snatchers” motif in sci-fi. The “body snatcher”—sometimes an alien, sometimes a plant mutated in an atomic blast—comes to represent the dissolution of the self in the face of some outer source of “evil” (e.g. communism, anti-communist paranoia, suburban ennui, urban decay). While criticisms of suburban sprawl were far more common, Sontag’s interest lies in the urban condition and, in particular, “the trauma suffered by everyone in the middle of the 20th century when it became clear that from now on to the end of human history, every person would spend his individual life not only under the threat of individual death, which is certain, but of something almost unsupportable psychologically—collective incineration and extinction which could come any time, virtually without warning” (48). While critiques of suburban *life* focus on the Levittownization of families that moved from the city to the outskirts, critiques of urban life focus on urban *death*, especially fear of unexpected, mass, anonymous annihilation.

After all, suburban sprawl exists in part as a means of moving large amounts of humans out of easily destroyed population centers (e.g. Eisenhower's postwar highway system that helps suburbs expand is also a means of evacuating cities). The 1950s version of the blockbuster disaster film enables an important working through of anxieties surrounding the once and possible future use of the atomic bomb, among other things. But more importantly, these films focus on the destruction of cities because cities come to represent the individual more than the individual herself does, as the very real threat of mass extinction comes to replace the loss of individuals. Hence the ending of *Colossus* presents the robot (that is, the body-snatched Jeremy) indiscriminately targeting a mostly anonymous crowd of attendees and guards. Jeremy has evolved, his technology advanced, from the targeted killing of a few to the blanket destruction of many.

While *Colossus* intends for the closing scenes of mass murder to stand as a warning against the development of artificial life, this impulse actually runs counter to the typical American perception of postwar technological progress. Far more common was the hope that tech innovations would alleviate some of the physical drudgery of both work and home life by substituting machine for human labor. According to Dinello, "In the midst of . . . the twin threats of atomic devastation and radioactive mutation, dreams of a cybernetic utopia thrived — a perfect society regulated by helpful utilitarian machines serving a psychologically engineered population of happy humans" (67).¹³⁸ B-movies tend to portray "the world of the future" positively while saving their stronger social criticism for military and atomic science. Because, as critic Victoria O'Donnell

¹³⁸ Dinello attributes this cultural view of robots mainly to Isaac Asimov, who "temporarily succeeded in countering the Frankenstein image of science, technology, and robots. A forerunner of the contemporary techno-crusaders, he believed that man's salvation depended on technology" (70).

notes, postwar science fiction films locate danger in “the spread of communism and the consequences of a nuclear disaster and radioactive fallout” (171),¹³⁹ scientists can be a source of danger but more often stand between the nation and imminent invasion or even destruction. From an exceptionalist standpoint, then, questions of scientific progress are also questions of national defense; unparalleled progress likewise means unparalleled defensive (and offensive) capability. According to Dinello, “while cyborg stories [do] dramatize cultural anxieties about the invasive and domineering role of technology in our lives,” “the cyborg also reflects . . . immortality, and—as a weapons system—omnipotence” (119). Because they are super-human, robots are also super-defenders, and the nations that create them share in their exceptional strength. Precisely because the B-movie genre is so overrun with savior robots doing good, then, Whitehead’s reference to a killer-robot film offers a useful point of entrance for a study of his text as it relates to potential technophobia. Before turning to Whitehead’s *Colossus*, however, a brief discussion of another of *Frankenstein*’s descendents, *Der Golem*, enables a consideration of the political context that informs *The Colossus of New York* (2003).

The Colossus of New York meets Der Golem

Paul Wegener’s film *Der Golem* (Germany, 1920) provides an opportunity to consider some further implications of the Frankenstein myth and the ways in which that myth informs contemporary constructions of technological supremacy. The film contains visual markers that both prefigure the visuals of *The Colossus of New York* (1958) and are reminiscent of the images of the destruction of the Twin Towers. Using this striking

¹³⁹ O’Donnell also points out that roughly 500 full- and short-length sci-fi films were produced between 1948 and 1962 (169).

visual coincidence as a jumping-off point, I explore reactions to comments by Baudrillard, Žižek, and others that suggest the United States dreamed of or even wished for the blockbuster-movie-like scenes realized during the attacks. I contend, first, that Baudrillard and others replicate classic constructions of United States/Middle East as Self/Other by reading the relationship between the two sides as one of Frankenstein to his monster. Second, I examine what this Frankenstein/Monster construction might mean for perceptions of American technological supremacy. Specifically, technological progress is not a value-neutral achievement; it also stands as a judgment of all that has not progressed, a judgment that reflects on the people and nations that wield these lesser, asymmetric technologies. As my reading will show, *The Colossus of New York* (2003) casts technological change in terms of biological and geological evolution, a metaphor that holds political significance for both the United States and the non-Westernized Middle East. While Whitehead uses the evolution metaphor as a means of redeeming what his city has lost, the implications of that construction for the Other are more damning than redemptive.

The Golem is a creature from Jewish folklore, a larger-than-human clay figure that comes to life when the name of God is written on a piece of paper placed in its mouth. Old Testament Adam is the original golem, shaped from dust and animated by the breath of God. Of course, Adam has what his lesser-golems do not: the breath, not simply the written name, of God. The main role of the golem is to serve and protect, to perform

simple household tasks and to save his creator from danger through brute strength.¹⁴⁰

While the golem can go “off-message,” it can only do so within specific parameters, i.e. following the law of his creator’s instructions rather than the intent. Most importantly, the golem never loses its all-important kill switch. Its creator always retains the power to stop it in its tracks. Notably, to create a golem is *not*, as one might assume, to interfere with the natural order of creation. As man is created in the image of God, so is the golem created in the image of man. Thus, the golem in its original form carries none of our contemporary perceptions of interfering with nature, nor does it represent Promethean ambition. As Sherwin explains, “[T]he creation of new life and life forms is not considered unnatural, immoral, or as playing God by classical Jewish sources, especially those about the golem. . . . In extending and improving upon the initial creation, human beings imitate rather than impersonate or play God. Through such actions, human beings do not violate nature but rather extend it” (137). Sherwin draws a clear distinction between this “authentic” circa-18th century golem and the post-Shelley golem that bears the influence of *Frankenstein*. Because Sherwin is a theologian, he sticks to the strict

¹⁴⁰ According to theologian Byron L. Sherwin, the earliest golem stories (taken from between the 3rd and 18th centuries) describe a “passive, mute” golem (135) who only takes on the role of household servant around the 18th century. I presume that the shift in the golem legend bears the marks of the influence of Enlightenment constructions of slavery. The golem, like Enlightenment-era slave, lives only to serve and has no sense of self or self-direction. Further, it must be instructed carefully lest it perform its tasks improperly, for it has no discerning sensibility. Golem as analog for slave seems clear, and seems almost to be a working through of Western versus Eastern assumptions regarding the personhood of the slave. That is, in non-Western contexts, pre-modern slaves retained cultural and personal identity; though they were property, they were human. In 18th-century constructions of slavehood, the slave loses all notions of the human. I mention this point only because the date of the shift of the golem’s characterization seems significant, as does its assumption of household duties. I want to assume that there is some sort of practical magic in action here, that the Jewish construction of the golem acts as a talisman against enslavement (of the Jews at the hands of the Europeans) in the same way that the golem’s story, and the associations between Jews and “black magic,” is supposed to act as a warning against attempts to drive the Jews out of Europe. Sherwin and others trace the shift in the golem but do not explain it; the questions I pose are beyond the scope of my research but within the scope of speculation.

Rabbinical definitions of the golem's uses and abuses and discounts modern and contemporary golems as not in keeping with biblical interpretation.¹⁴¹

Nevertheless, the meaning and message of the golem do change over time, so that by the 20th century, the golem, including Wegener's film creature, is more monster than helper, more creation gone wrong than creation in keeping with the word and name of God. According to Sherwin, the golem becomes "an uncontrollable malevolent creature that overpowers its creator and others whom it has been created to serve. No longer the obedient servant, the golem becomes a powerful master, a monster, whose creation portends inevitable tragedy and destruction. Its destruction, while necessary, often remains elusive" (135-36). This description evidences traces of Shelley's monster that reappear not only in the Wegener's golem but also in Lourié's colossal robot. Indeed, the filmic monsters all share many physical features. As seen in these screenshots,



Jeremy and the golem share obviously thickened brows, oversized shoulders and leaden movements, in addition to very similar "birth" scenes in which their lifeless bodies are

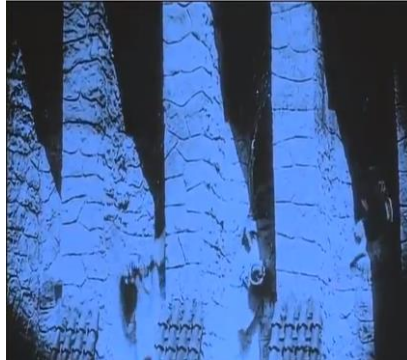
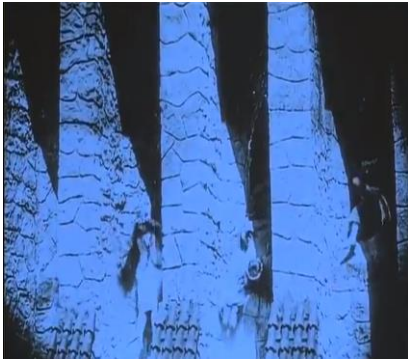
¹⁴¹ Problematically, Sherwin blames the bastardization of the golem on the fact that the creators of the 20th century stories are "non-Jewish artists, writers, and filmmakers" (135), implying that the lack of the knowledge of the original source is a problem rather than an interesting, useful progression of text and influence. Sherwin disavows the assertion that Shelley might have drawn on the golem legend in creating *Frankenstein* (136) and instead claims that her text is partly responsible for the contemporary misreading of the golem legend.

suddenly animated by the work (scientific or religious) of their creators. The two also share similar death scenes: after going on rampages in their respective cities, both “die” at the hands of children. Jeremy dies after asking his son to pull his kill switch, while the golem is accidentally destroyed when a child removes the animating amulet from his chest. More importantly, however, the golem picks up that connotation of the unnatural order. In the cases of both *Der Golem* and *The Colossus of New York*, humans invite destruction by choosing to create life, by playing god, by not checking the limits of their technological abilities.

Besides sharing visual and thematic similarities, a reading of *Der Golem* enriches a reading of *Colossus* because watching the film results in the same experience of the uncanny remarked on by Baudrillard, Žižek, and others in the context of disaster movies and 9/11, but in a most unexpected place. The film depicts the most famous of the classical golem stories, the 16th-century tale of the Golem of Prague, in which a rabbi creates a golem as a means of protecting his community from pogroms. In the film, the Rabbi Loew, attempting to prove his conjuring powers and convince the emperor that the Jews are too dangerous to be driven out without consequence, brings his golem to the palace.



(Figs. 1 and 2)



(Figs. 3 and 4)¹⁴²



(Figs. 5 and 6)

At the palace, Rabbi Loew explains the visions of persecution he has received and begins to conjure those visions for the assembled court, having warned them that they must not, under any circumstances, laugh at what they see. The court jester does not follow this warning and tells a joke; the people laugh, and the walls of the palace begins to collapse

¹⁴² I provide these screenshots as evidence for my argument but acknowledge that the visual similarities I discuss are extremely difficult to make out here. Helpfully, *Der Golem* is in the public domain, and the entire film is readily available on YouTube. To see the segment of the film I discuss in detail, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODc_QLZK3zA>. The collapse of the palace begins at 1:04:30.

(Fig. 1). The crowd panics and runs for the windows (Fig. 2 shows the jester), some of them choosing to jump their death rather than be crushed by the collapsing beams (Figs. 3 and 4. The frames above show a woman with long hair in the second window from the left just before and just after she allows herself to fall.). Inside the palace, the emperor, covered in dust from the collapsing walls and ceiling, pleads with the rabbi to stop the destruction (Fig. 5.). The rabbi orders the golem to prop up the beams of the ceiling (Fig. 6), thus saving the trapped crowd.

The visual similarities to news footage of the Trade Center collapse are uncanny. The shape of the palace windows mimics the narrow cathedral windows of the Towers. The dust on the clothes of the people trapped in the palace mimics the dust-covered refugees and survivors of the Towers' collapse. Perhaps most striking, *Der Golem* features its own jumper, the woman who dangles from a window for a moment before plunging to her death. Falling bodies and ashen suits have become visual markers of September 11th and are considered acceptable filmic representations of destruction. While stunning to see those same visual markers in a 1920s German expressionist film, the contemporary American blockbuster often features such scenes and as such bears the brunt of criticism in the wake of 9/11. In "Welcome to the Desert of the Real!", Žižek writes, "[T]o us, corrupted by Hollywood, the landscape and the shots we saw of the collapsing towers could not but remind us of the most breathtaking scenes in the catastrophe big productions" (386). Baudrillard makes a similar comparison between "catastrophe films" and 9/11 in "L'Esprit du Terrorisme" (405), but Žižek's point is more direct: what viewers have imagined (Baudrillard substitutes "wished" for) in summer blockbusters and disaster films has come true. The nation's extreme political/military

reaction to the event has more to do with the defense of a destroyed virtual world than investment in the actual event of the attacks, which, while terrible, were ultimately limited in scope.

Reactions to Baudrillard's comments, and to some extent Žižek's, were on the whole negative, in keeping with the witch hunt-like reactions to Susan Sontag's assertion that the "perpetrators" of the attacks "were not cowards" ("Talk of the Town"). Critic Richard Wolin's "Kant at Ground Zero," a review of the Derrida/Habermas dialogue *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, characterizes the objections made to both Žižek's and Baudrillard's immediate responses to the event. Calling this moment the "nadir" of postmodern theorization, he writes, "[T]he pamphlets of Žižek and Baudrillard exude a barely concealed glee about Osama bin Laden's 'divine surprise' in September 2001." While Žižek's statements are more powerful for being clearer, Baudrillard in particular seemed to incite serious controversy. In his 2004 essay "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?", Bruno Latour asks, "What has critique become when . . . Jean Baudrillard claims in a published book that the Twin Towers destroyed themselves under their own weight, so to speak, undermined by the utter nihilism inherent in capitalism itself—as if the terrorist planes were pulled to suicide by the powerful attraction of this black hole of nothingness?" (228). Latour points out the "published book" specifically because, later in his argument, he notes that the "instant revisionism" of conspiracy theorists now carries more weight than established facts. Baudrillard, it seems, is just such a wrong-minded theorist, though one with the weight of longstanding critical importance as well as many published arguments behind him.

Precisely because Baudrillard's reading of 9/11 as blockbuster wish fulfillment resonated so poorly even with liberal-minded critics, I want to return to *Der Golem*, a film in which symbolic and actual seats of power were falling down before skyscrapers in their modern and contemporary forms were realized or their destruction dreamed of. *Der Golem* demonstrates that the visual markers of 9/11 exist not just in contemporary movies distributed globally to the same "enemy populations" of viewers who are implicated in the terrorism they see on screen, but also in a silent 35mm film dating from the near-beginning of movie production. This consideration of September 11th in the context of *Der Golem* thus invites a reading of the attacks on the World Trade Center as a Frankenstein story, a story of a creation that turns against its creator. While this is not a particularly new argument—it is, in a sense, Sontag's very assertion when she says that the attacks were "undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions" ("Talk of the Town")—this reading helpfully reveals two points. First, despite their seemingly radical politics, theorists like Baudrillard remain incapable of thinking outside of a creator/creation, Self/Other, dynamic. "Leftist" though it may seem, the rhetorical move of blaming the United States for the "creation" of its opponent merely replicates the Self/Other binarism while only seeming to shift the non-West into the central position. Second, a consideration of the Other invites an examination of how that construction applies to technological supremacy. Not only do Americans remain without a non-binaristic way of imagining the relationship between symmetric and asymmetric warfare, but the evolution metaphor used to describe technological progress in the United States is even more damning, for it constructs all counter-technologies not merely as "Other" but as "unevolved."¹⁴³

¹⁴³ See also Chapter Two's discussion of Middle Eastern men, primitivism, and the Other in *The 9/11*

Both *Der Golem* and *The Colossus of New York* (1958) remind viewers of an old joke about monster movies, namely that the threat of the creation would not be nearly so great had the creator not made the monster (the golem, the robot) so outlandishly large. Both golems and killer robots are capable of destruction precisely because they are larger than the humans who create them; once they run amok, they cannot be stopped by traditional means (hence the plot device of the innocent child who magically stops the monster in its tracks). The joke is funny when it is about B-movie monsters in bad makeup on cheaply designed sets but decidedly less so when applied to its analog, the Twin Towers. Immediately following the attacks, the design of the WTC complex was called into question. Why, for example, create a building so large that it could not hope to be saved if it caught fire and its safety measures failed? For the hour or so that they stood after impact, the Towers became a raging monster, dropping cement bolsters and balls of fire on humans below while trapping others a thousand feet in the air, far beyond the reach of rescuers. To borrow Baudrillard's words, the Towers could only succumb to self-destruction; the imminent danger posed by the creation could not be contained by its creators. The problem is that the World Trade Center also represented, at the time it was constructed, the culmination of the imagination and of the technological ability to realize it, just as Frankenstein's monster touched the limit of the scientific imagination and capability of its creator. Just as the monster and the golem allow their creators to obtain god-like powers, so did the creation of the Twin Towers for those who visited and worked in it: to stand a thousand feet tall, to see beyond the grid of the city below to the ocean's horizon, to speed from the ground to the sky and back again.

Read in the context of the Frankenstein myth, then, Baudrillard's controversial take on 9/11 is more a classic tale of a scientist losing control of his creation than of a radical departure from those classic narratives. In the introduction to "L'Esprit du Terrorisme," Baudrillard writes, "These attacks turn not only the whole play of history and power relations topsy-turvy, but also the conditions of their analysis" (403). Yet the power relations he details exactly mimic the power relations of a monster and its creator, from Prospero and Caliban through Frankenstein and beyond. He writes, "It is that the logical and inexorable climb to power of power itself exacerbates the will to destroy this power; and power itself is accomplice with its own destruction" (404), and later, "The West, assuming God's position (supine with divine omnipotence and absolute moral legitimacy) has become suicidal and declared war upon itself" (405). He expands on this notion of a suicidal power, writing, "It is moreover very possible that the terrorists . . . never forecast the Twin Towers collapse The symbolic collapse of a whole system happened through an invisible complicity, as if, by collapsing on their own, by committing suicide, the towers had played their part in the game" (405). Read in the context of *The Colossus of New York* (1958), it is striking how not-new this argument is. The creator steps outside its bounds by "assuming God's position." The creation, finding itself outside the bounds of its creator, has a role to play in the classic tale: it collapses, it hits its own kill switch, because there is no other action for it to take.

Not surprisingly, those who attacked the Trade Center are constructed via the same creator/creation, Self/Other binary. Žižek cites "the long story from the conquest of America to the slaughter in the Congo" as the chief motivating factor for the attacks, asking, "Is it not that, in the exploding Twin Towers, this violence directed at the

threatening Outside turned back at us? . . . America's peace was bought by the catastrophes going on elsewhere" (387, 389). Likewise, in another widely-denounced response, Katha Pollitt declares, "I've never been one to blame the United States for every bad thing that happens in the Third World, but it is a fact that our government supported militant Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion in 1979" ("Put Out No Flags"). And, for Baudrillard, the cause of terrorist action is simply "the system itself that has created the objective conditions for [the] brutal retaliation" (405). In each of these arguments, there is a clear attempt to see the attackers as more than their actions, to, as Noam Chomsky implores, "seek to understand what may have led to the crimes, which means making an effort to enter the minds of the likely perpetrators" ("A Quick Reaction").¹⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the West remains central to the story, with the non-West occupying the periphery; for all their acknowledgement of the power dynamic, Žižek, Pollitt, Chomsky, and Baudrillard still imagine the East as a shadowy product of the West.

In sum, then, both the Twin Towers and the people who attacked them are read by Baudrillard and others as creations gone wrong. Because the towers were essentially a triumph of technology, this is neither a surprising nor a particularly disruptive characterization. To return to Whitehead's evolution metaphor, the Twin Towers, as technological achievement, can be seen as falling prey to the same force of evolution, planned obsolescence, that plague all devices. Once they surpass their intended purpose, they implode, fall apart, disappear, only to be replaced by newer, better objects. In

¹⁴⁴ To a certain extent, *The 9/11 Report* pays attention to and acknowledges these same conditions when discussing the growth of al Qaeda, leading to a more nuanced understanding of terrorism rather than a thoughtless demonization of the perpetrators.

Whitehead's *Colossus*, technological evolution bears redemptive power. The Twin Towers are gone, but they could not have stood forever under any circumstances. They would have to, by the laws of both nature and science, eventually be replaced by the technologies that surpass them. And indeed, the construction of the Freedom Tower shows this process of evolution to be accurate.

But what does this notion of evolution hold for those Others who carried out the attacks? The evolution metaphor is useful as a means of analyzing social systems, but, like any terminology borrowed from another field, it is not without fault. Spencer's social Darwinism stands as a classic example of the "misuse" of evolutionary metaphors: using the term "survival of the fittest" to explain the distribution of wealth in a society undermines the moral imperative for public assistance by providing a biological reason (and purpose) for poverty. The schema both allows for and requires "unfitness," which is itself a problem, but the larger issue is that biological evolution is both random and value-neutral, while "social evolution" is not. That is, while the minute changes that add up to the evolution of a species occur without intention (e.g. a random change in an organism turns out to be useful and so promotes survival), social evolution grows out of thoughtful defense of or response to existing power dynamics within a community.

Ultimately, the notion of technological evolution operates in the same manner as social evolution, carrying implications for the biological and moral "fitness" of those who wield evolved technologies and "unfitness" for those who do not. This is not merely a construction of "better than" but one of "more human." That is, the Othering of the Afghans who were targeted in the first phase of the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars is an Othering based on very specific technological terms. Because social/political

commentary in the United States has improved to the point where one ought not to claim that one race is more intelligent than another, or more peaceful than another, those claims have shifted to other, seemingly less race-based grounds. Thus, the Afghans are constructed as a primitive people not because of race or ideology but because of a lack of technology, a lack that earns them comparisons to various animals. For example, a *New York Times* article that dates from the beginning of “the *hunt* for Bin Laden” (emphasis mine) describes Afghanistan as “a virtual ant farm of thousands of caves, countless miles of tunnels, deeply dug-in bases and heavily fortified bunkers” (“A Nation Challenged”). *Times* writer Naomi Wax details the extent of the animalization of Afghanistan and its people, noting, “President Bush has repeatedly vowed to ‘smoke them out of their holes,’ conjuring an image of burrowing rodents whose eradication is a only a matter of fumigation. . . . The Taliban’s use of caves has been cast as primitive, cowardly and amusing by everyone from late-night comedians to cartoonists” (“Notes from Underground”). For his part Žižek describes Afghanistan as “one of the poorest countries in which peasants barely survive on barren hills” (388). These descriptions function to dehumanize the Afghan people not on the grounds of purely racial or cultural Otherness (claims that are or should be impossible to make given that the Other might now live next door), but technological otherness: if a people can live in such “animal-like” conditions, surely they must have been left behind by evolution and time. As Wax explains, “according to Kenneth D. Rose, ‘It proved extremely difficult to put an admirable (much less heroic) spin on burrowing into the earth to save one’s hide’ Retreating into shelters ‘represented a devolution of the human species’ suggesting ‘that humanity’s long climb out of the dark caves was now being reversed’” (“Notes from Underground”).

While claims about the tech gap between Afghanistan and the United States are easily made and not untrue despite being problematically employed, that comparison is less easily drawn between the U.S. and Iraq, the site of the second phase of the post-September 11th offensives in the Middle East. Iraq, unlike Afghanistan but like Lebanon, Syria, and Iran, is considered a “Westernized” nation; while it maintains a distinct and independent culture, its major cities are globally-connected and “modern” in terms of housing, transportation systems, and so forth. Hence the U.S. military performs a very specific capture of Saddam Hussein to underscore the necessity of the intervention. The image of Hussein shifts from 20th-century Saddam in three-piece suit, tie, and fedora to the bearded, disheveled Saddam, pulled from a “spider hole”¹⁴⁵ and later shown wild-eyed, being combed for lice. Hussein himself devolves in this moment, from independent leader to captured animal.

Thus the former leader of Iraq slips down the evolutionary ladder, while the Afghan people never quite made the climb up, according to contemporary depictions. Interestingly, 19th-century newspaper reports on Afghanistan resemble current ones. An 1885 *New York Times* article, “The Situation in Afghanistan: What a British Army Officer Says on the Subject,” describes Afghan villages as “really small forts more or less strong, according to size and importance. These are built as a rule of mud, which in that country hardens like concrete. The walls are made very thick, impervious often to field artillery.” The emphasis on mud as building material is common in most descriptions, as

¹⁴⁵ From William Safire’s “From the ‘Spider Hole’”: “This is Army lingo from the Vietnam era. The Vietcong guerrillas dug ‘Cu Chi tunnels’ often connected to what the G.I.’s called ‘spider holes’ – space dug deep enough for the placement of a clay pot large enough to hold a crouching man, covered by a wooden plank and concealed with leaves. When an American patrol passed, the Vietcong would spring out, shooting. But the hole had its dangers; if the pot broke or cracked, the guerrilla could be attacked by poisonous spiders or snakes. Hence, ‘spider hole.’”

is the ability of the buildings and caves to withstand military assault. Like the descriptions written a century ago, a 2001 article, also from the *New York Times*, describes “the system [of caves and bunkers]” as “devilishly complex and easy to hide within. As even the Pentagon admits, the most heavily fortified parts, where Mr. bin Laden may be concealed, could well be invulnerable to the most powerful conventional bombs known” (“Caves and Tunnels”). Both the 19th-century British and 21st-century American descriptions of Afghanistan participate in an imperialist construction of foreign landscape. As Said explains in his reading of Forster’s *A Passage to India*, the (now former) colonies are “unapprehendable and too large” (*Culture* 201), their geography part of a system of meaning “resistant to discursive appropriation by [their] conquerors” (Parry 175).¹⁴⁶ The caves of Afghanistan, like Forster’s Marabar Caves, are rendered incomprehensible by nature of their otherness, and the persons who dwell within them seem more animal than human, their knowledge of the land attributed to their primitive powers.

These descriptions bring an important point to light: despite lacking the technological capability of the United States—despite, that is, not changing their primary tactic of evasion in a century—Bin Laden and his supporters nonetheless avoided capture for nearly 10 years. This fact, like the September 11th attacks, presents a problem for perceptions of the United States’ military and technological supremacy: namely the challenge to that supremacy by a lesser, less *evolved*, source. To combat this problem, the U.S. embraces constructions of both the Afghan landscape and its people as animal-like, asserting that the survival of the people depends not on technology but on the “devilishly

¹⁴⁶ See also Sara Suleri’s discussion of Indian geography in “Forster’s Imperial Erotic.”

complex,” unchanging landscape, a landscape to which they have adapted, but which they have not mastered. Further, just as the success of the attackers depended on Western consumer goods and technologies (airplanes, namely, but also satellite phones and computer networks) to be successful, bin Laden’s successful evasion depended on a similar reliance on those technologies as well as on the invisible cloak of an illegible post-colonial territory. Read in this vein, then, Baudrillard’s comment—that the collapse of the Towers was wished for, and that it could have only be done in by their own hand—becomes not a criticism of American blockbuster culture but a means of redeeming the loss of the Towers. That is, just as the hijackers needed one piece of Western technology to defeat another piece of American technology, so does Baudrillard’s dream of destruction enact a vision where only the nation—not Westernized Saudi attackers, or their Taliban backers—is capable of defeating itself. While widely criticized for his attacks on American culture, Baudrillard in fact performs a rhetorical move—the simultaneous undercutting and shoring up of exceptionalist discourse—that Whitehead similarly undertakes in *The Colossus of New York*. In the reading of the text that follows, I will examine the characterization of New York as a piece of monstrous technology, the evolution of which represents both the best and worst of the nation’s capabilities.

“Keep this machine up and running”: *The Colossus of New York* (2003)

Monsters are a storytelling tool, like domestic realism and close third.
Whitehead, “When Zombies Attack!”

In a series of essays that are equal parts travelogue and elegy, Colson Whitehead’s *The Colossus of New York: A City in Thirteen Parts* (2003) rewrites the classic B-movie invasion narrative so that the monster New Yorkers face is not an outsider but the city

itself. Specifically, Whitehead locates “monstrousness” in the way that the city manufactures identity, taking the “raw material” of outsiders and converting them into robotic, anonymous, isolated New Yorkers about whom the city maintains complete knowledge. These New Yorkers, individuals strikingly similar in their activities and concerns, are composed of the paths they walk and the buildings they see as they daily make their way through the city. Because their identities are so strongly tied to place and routine, any threat to the city becomes a threat to their personhood. The first half of the text expresses anxieties related not just to the process of identity re-formation (or more accurately, subsumption) but also to the ever-present possibility that the city, and all it contains, might be obliterated. To counter this anxiety, Whitehead utilizes the monster metaphors he crafts in the initial sections of the text to suggest that the city, as a piece of technology, is subject to a process of creation and dissolution that should be read as natural and mournful rather than as threatening. As a part of the larger September 11th canon, *Colossus* walks an interesting line between supporting and ironizing exceptionalist discourse. While the nation’s technological superiority, as well as New York’s status as an incomparable city, are clearly acknowledged in Whitehead’s loving descriptions, a narrative of technological progress automatically assumes that the objects in question will one day be replaced, so that it seems it was “never really there at all” (Whitehead *Colossus* 158). Thus *The Colossus of New York* at once quells post-9/11 anxieties about America’s future while quietly asserting that the nation’s narrative of progress lumbers on not toward perfection but toward eventual dissolution.

There are several ways of reading “monsters” in a 9/11 context. First, the “terrorist as monster” construction builds on the point that the United States created Al

Qaeda by arming, training, and funding Afghans in their war with Soviet Russia in the 1980s. Ethicist Michael Hyde points out that, “Before they became terrorists, bin Laden and his fellow ‘holy warriors’ (mujahideen) in Afghanistan were ‘rebels’ supported by the United States in their ongoing confrontation with the Soviet Union” (17-18). Hyde then takes the next step to the Frankenstein allusion, writing, “The United States had a hand in the creation of a ‘monster’ who took serious exception to the way its ‘master’ ended up treating it” (18). Hyde’s direct reference to Frankenstein here is coincidental to my argument, and I find his treatment of Afghan agency potentially problematic, but his comments nonetheless characterize the United States as playing a large role in the creation of anti-U.S. sentiment in the Middle East. The second way of reading 9/11’s monsters is akin to Shelley’s criticism of technology: the planes and skyscrapers that the United States has built take on an other-than-intended use after falling into “enemy” hands, thus proving that one can never predict the end-use of an invention. *Colossus* adds another point of criticism: the city, in Whitehead’s words, “stopped needing human hands to make it go” (144) and as such has become a monstrous creation, yet also a normalized one, in that it follows the path of unpredictable creation and destruction followed by all inventions. That is, while other constructions of 9/11’s “monsters” (the Taliban, U.S. military intervention that helped create Al Qaeda, technology in the “wrong” hands) organize the attacks into a good/evil binary, Whitehead’s tale of the city’s change over time becomes almost value-neutral. In his version of the aftermath, the city can only do what any invention would: it is created, it takes on a life of its own, and it changes into something new.

While the titular monster-movie/Frankenstein allusion does not over-determine Whitehead's imagining of New York, it does inform the text's initial construction of the city as an invention that takes on a life of its own. The relationship between city-dweller as creator and city as creation begins in the text's prologue, "City Limits." Whitehead writes, "You start building your private New York the first time you lay eyes on it. . . . You stepped out of Penn Station into the dizzying hustle of Eighth Avenue and fainted. Freeze it there: that instant is the first brick in your city" (4). Throughout the collection, Whitehead¹⁴⁷ plays with the idea that New York is a singularly personal city, existing primarily as a function of experience and memory. Each person creates his or her "own personal skyline" (6). Not unexpectedly, these personal skylines change over time, but such changes are initially read in a positive light. "You are a New Yorker," Whitehead claims, "the first time you say, That used to be Munsey's, or That used to be the Tic Toc Lounge" (3). Knowledge of changes to the city's landscape represents belongingness; likewise, the act of witnessing such change becomes an act of creation. Whitehead claims that "The disappeared pizza parlor is still here because you are here" (7). Later, he says, "Go back to your old haunts in your old neighborhoods and what do you find: they remain and have disappeared. The greasy spoon, the deli . . . they are gone. But look past the windows of the travel agency that replaced your pizza. It is all still there, I assure

¹⁴⁷ In general there is no stable narrative voice in the text. Rather, there is an anonymous "speaker," a Whitman-esque Everyman that shifts within and among sections, variably male, female, adult, and child. I would, however, argue that "City Limits" is Whitehead's personal voice, not only because the voice is a stable, non-shifting first-person here, but because Whitehead references his own biographical subject position when he writes, "My first city memory is of looking out a subway window as the train erupted from the tunnel on its way to 125th Street . . . It's the early seventies, so everything is filthy" (4-5). "City Limits" also appeared as "Lost and Found" in the November 11, 2001 *New York Times Magazine*, as a part of a longer "The Way We Live Now" feature. The "Broadway" section, which is the only other section with a stable (3rd person) subject, also represents Whitehead's personal voice.

you” (6). Whitehead insists on a resilient version of the city that secures its permanence via memory. By dwelling on the city as it was and claiming that memory restores the city to the equivalent of a cached copy, a city-last-seen, the New Yorkers who build their personal city “brick by brick” maintain control of their creations.

However, the complete destruction and removal from the city of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center radically disrupts Whitehead’s attempts to read all changes to the city’s landscape as “natural.” He dwells on the changes to the skyline specifically, writing that, while once each New Yorker created his or her “own personal skyline” (6), the irreparable loss of the Towers, seemingly a touchstone in everyone’s vision of that skyline, must now be mourned: “I never got a chance to say good-bye to some of my old buildings. Some I lived in, others were part of a skyline I thought would always be there” (8). Note that just a few paragraphs earlier, there was no need to say good-bye. Any change to a building could be undone simply through the act of remembrance; one only needs to “go back,” “look past,” and “go beyond” the seen (6) to actively envision the structure as it was.¹⁴⁸ This instability of both memory and the city stems from an inability to integrate the violent destruction associated with September 11th into the normal pattern of change that characterizes the city. That is, the radically altered skyline erupts through every attempt Whitehead makes to read the destruction of the towers as normal. Every construction site Whitehead sees becomes an immediate reminder of the disaster scene downtown: “[W]here you bought this very jacket is now rubble behind a blue plywood fence and a future office building. Damage has been done to your city. You say, It happened overnight. But of course it didn’t” (7). Later, he thinks, “It is hard to imagine

¹⁴⁸ To be clear, Whitehead never quite settles on one way of reading New York, at least not in the “City Limits” section. Rather, he shifts back and forth between the need for memory to preserve the city and the realization that it cannot.

that something will take their place, but at this very moment the people with the right credentials are considering how to fill the craters” (10). September 11th marks the moment at which New Yorkers lose control of their city. Where once one could see layer upon layer of the city’s life on one corner (“the motley construction material of your jerry-built metropolis. Your favorite newsstands, restaurants, movie theaters” [6]), now one only sees absence. The skyline that was uniquely imagined by each individual New Yorker has been reduced to a “crater” that the imagination cannot fill. Instead, the control of that city’s skyline shifts from the individual to city planners “with the right credentials.” To return to the avenues of monstrosity traced above, the terrorists’ act of crashing planes into the Towers results in a psychic slipped grip, a loss of control over what the city means, what it should be, and who it is for, that cannot be overcome.

Once the imaginary New York becomes unmoored from its home in the memory of New Yorkers, it takes on a life of its own. Whitehead imagines a city that creates, rather than is created by its inhabitants. He writes: “The city knows you better than any living person because it has seen you when you are alone. . . . It saw the bewilderment on your face as you stepped out of the stolen matinee [...]. It saw you half-running up the street after you got the keys to your first apartment. The city saw all that. Remembers, too” (8-9). The city as it is described here takes on a threatening air: it sees individuals when they are vulnerable (alone, bewildered, new to the city) and it *remembers*, becoming a storehouse of knowledge about everything (and everyone) within its borders. The power of memory shifts from New Yorker to New York. Whitehead pursues this personification, writing, “Consider what all your old apartments would say if they got together to swap stories. They could . . . gossip about who you are after midnight. . . .

You picked up yoga, you put down yoga You tried on selves and got rid of them, and this makes your old rooms wistful: why must things change?” (9). The city and the self have switched subject positions; now the city bears witness to the gradual change of the self over time. Thus a problem surfaces that Whitehead spends the rest of the text trying to work out. If the buildings are “the caretakers of your reinventions” (9), and if it is the city that creates the self and not the other way around, as it once was, then “One day the city we built will be gone, and when it goes, we go. When the buildings fall, we topple, too” (9). If “all our old places are proof that we were here,” and “Our streets are calendars containing who we were and who we will be next” (9), then a radically altered city makes for a radically altered self. Again, this section is vaguely threatening: the ever-reinventing individual seems silly in the eyes of the (stable, by comparison) city, but that sense of embarrassment is replaced by fear of what will happen when the city performs (or is subject to) its own version of rapidly changing “wardrobe and musical tastes” (9). Hence “City Limits” ends with the recognition that the city is “on the loose”: like a supercomputer, the city creates and stores New Yorkers; the self has become inextricable from the city.

The image of New York as a machine that manufactures identities continues in the section titled “The Port Authority.” Whitehead writes, “A man in goggles records the time of arrival. . . . Thousands of arrivals every day, they won’t stop coming. Different people but all the same. They try to sneak by with different faces but it is no use” (15). The recording of the time of entry evokes the recording of one’s time of birth (also, death), but the detail of the goggles adds a layer of distance between the man and the arrivals, as well as an industrial tone to the depot, where “inside the terminal the light is

always the same queasy green rays” (22). The process of erasing the singular identities of everyone who enters the city starts even before the bus arrives in New York.

Whitehead writes, “No matter their hometowns, no matter their reasons for sliding cash through ticket windows, on the bus they are all alike. They get on” (16). Here, difference is reduced to one commonality, the commonality of departure. Commonality is not, however, community, nor is community sought after: “They all want to sit alone. . . . At the next stop people arrange bags and jackets on the empty seats beside them and avoid eye contact or feign sleep when the new pilgrims try to find seats” (16). The bus thus becomes a training ground for the city, which requires practiced anonymity. Not only is human contact annoying (“The guy in the next seat won’t take a hint. She sends signals . . . but he keeps on yapping” [18]), but it is particularly unpleasant, as evidenced when Whitehead writes, “Thank god for the white detachable headrest slipcovers, an invention that saves us from germs. . . . He takes a piss and tries not to splash at every latest jolt” (18-19). A sense of individuality attempts to push back against the overwhelming sameness that comes to characterize the city’s immigrants, but even the “origins stories” of the riders display every archetype of the immigrant story: “All the big agencies are there”; “Not the first in the family to make the attempt. The suitcase is the same one his father used decades before. This time it will be different”; “They will send back money when they get settled” (20). Each story here is separate but, by stringing them together, Whitehead implies that they, and their outcome, are all the same. In fact, for a meditation on arrivals and “fresh starts,” “The Port Authority” is overwhelmingly sad, its ending seemingly pre-determined: “If they think those two words New York will fix them, who are we to say otherwise. They wait for so long to see the famous skyline

but wake at the arrival gate and with a final lurch are delivered into dinginess. This first disappointment will help acclimate” (22). Here “we” assumes a cohort who knows better, but that gesture toward a community of shared experience is not sustained throughout the text. It functions instead to forecast the coming faceless anonymity each individual will find in the city. With the return of the birth imagery from the beginning of the chapter, the text offers a rebirth of the “pilgrims” into unfulfilled expectations. Even though “everyone arrives at the same time, in the same weather, and in this way it is possible for all of them to start even” (22), it is clear that the larger point is that they will also end even, in the disappointment of the “we” who know otherwise.

The “Port Authority” section of the text does not allude to 9/11 or to the changed skyline mainly because, before they arrive in the city, the newcomers do not possess an image of New York as it “used to be.” But the essay does work counter to exceptionalist discourse in one specific way, which is to deny New York its special “greatest city in the world” status. While expectations for what New York might mean run high, Whitehead already states that those expectations will not come close to being fulfilled. There is no sense of joy or of transformation upon arrival; there is only “dinginess” and “queasy green rays,” as the passengers “shuffle” and “stumble” (22) into the terminal. This immediate declaration that New York is *not* the place where dreams are fulfilled—a point only made clearer by the fact that, at Port Authority, the buses dropping off incomers are immediately loaded with “the ones who need to leave” (22)—runs counter to myths of success and reinvention that are often attached to the city. Further, the stripping of identity at the point of entry resists early 20th-century depictions of immigration, where one’s homeland often over-determined one’s future in the United States as immigrants

were organized, or organized themselves, into new lives strongly tied to ethnic identity. Likewise, racial identities, even those that are still clearly associated with specific locations in the city (the Harlem of imagination, for example, if not of fact), are peculiarly absent from the text. Earlier Whitehead calls New York “the biggest hiding place in the world” (20) and indicates that escapist intentions to lose oneself in the city are far from unusual. The overwhelming sameness of those reinvented selves, however, seems strikingly at odds with perceptions of individuality and self-determination regularly associated with the city.

“The Port Authority” also introduces the key stylistic elements of the collection: a choppy series of at times disconnected paragraphs filled with often-repeated words and phrases that, overall, create a sense of disjointedness and vague unease. In a description of the ride toward the city, for example, Whitehead writes, “Across three states the empty bottle of juice rolls up and down the bus between shoes and bags. No one claims ownership. Responsible parties pretend not to hear. That is surely a wig two rows up. They try out new positions for their legs. One drawn up and the other wedged into the footrest” (17). The disconnected nature of the narrative further underscores the isolation and separateness of Whitehead’s subjects. Although they journey together and are born into the city at the same time, as similarly blank slates, they are utterly detached from one another. As later essays will show, Whitehead’s New York does not match up to the image of a city that unites in the face of turmoil.

If the “Port Authority” section details the arrival of the newcomers, stripped of identity and awaiting the imposition of their new city selves, then the section that follows it, “Morning,” details the day-to-day aspects of city life that constitute “the

depersonalizing conditions of modern urban society” (Sontag “The Imagination of Disaster” 48). Whitehead begins in the mode of the urban pastoral, where machines have taken the place of animals: “Twelve-ton gluttons chew the curb and burp up to windows in mechanical gusts. Where’s a rooster when you need one. Instead hydraulics crow. Tabloid haystacks squat” (25). The organic timekeepers that would otherwise mark the beginning of the day have here been replaced by a cycle of garbage truck pick-ups and newspaper deliveries. The sounds of the city, insidious and all encompassing, form one part of the mechanized routine:

All this metal grinding, this is the machine of morning reaching out
through cogs and gears to claim and wake us. Check the clock to see how
much more sleep. Still time. Down there they deliver and pick up. We
each have routes we keep to keep this place going. (25)

Here begins the city’s incursion into the private space of home, transforming the human experience of waking into a mechanized process. The “machine of morning” controls the speaker, claiming him, while the alarm clock, not the body, determines the necessity of sleep. As the essay continues, various devices mediate the speaker’s experience of the world: “Turn on appliances, lights and coffee machines, radios and television sets. Listen to newscasters: while you were safe in here the world may have lost its way. Let these smoothing voices pat down until you are made” (26). Absent human connections, the speaker relies on his machines to provide comfort; meanwhile, the collection makes its first indirect references to September 11th and, specifically, to the ways in which news of the event was delivered via television even to those who lived in the city. It soon becomes clear that the intermediary of television is required in order for one to

experience one's own life: "We could all use a handy computer graphic and earnest newscaster and ominous tagline . . . yet no technicians scramble to produce it. [T]here's a little cartoon sun over a region you don't inhabit" (27). Here, one's own experiences cannot be understood without "technical assistance" that never appears, while experiences foreign to one's own are consumed as neat bytes of knowledge that ultimately only make those experiences *more* foreign (the "region you don't inhabit"). By the conclusion of the "Morning" section, Whitehead has established that the city produces an ordered system into which those who "each have routes [they] keep to keep this place going" are slotted (25). One of the essay's voices thinks, "If only my robot double were working, I'd send him to the office in my place. They like him better anyway" (31), expressing the overarching point of "Morning": the identical and repetitive rhythms of city life result in individuals who are relatively interchangeable. Whitehead stops just short of "cog in the wheel" imagery and instead abruptly shifts from the language of mechanization to that of play-acting, writing, "Places, everyone. Keep this machine up and running. Deliver and pick up . . . Practice inflections for the big proposal. Devise busywork for the intern. Cram for the big test" (34). The city requires the performance of many small actions, but the dependence is mutual: while the world would fall apart—the machine would not remain up and running—were everyone not to take their places, without the city, there are no places to take. In "Morning," it seems impossible that one's self could exist outside the city that creates it.

Because the city becomes the core component of identity for those who live there, a sense of anxiety slowly begins to build upon the realization that, at any moment, the machine that is New York could fall apart. Whitehead works specifically in images of

steel, directly tying the survival (or downfall) of the inhabitants to that of the city itself. First, one of the passage's many anonymous speakers leaves for work, and "Before he crosses the threshold he must recite the manifesto that makes him steel" (28). Later, as nameless others walk to work, Whitehead describes, "The superstitious and the merely wary avoid walking on the steel doors that speak of the underworld. Gossip tells of people who have fallen . . . Steel rattles under her brave treads and warns. Mornings will kill you with their trapdoors" (30). And finally, the city's children likewise join in this marriage of human to metal. As they make their way through their own routines, Whitehead writes, "If they knew it will always be like this . . . they would topple onto sidewalks" (34). The steel rattles, bodies fall, the morning is filled with unforeseen trapdoors: together these images obliquely reference September 11th, melding the organic and inorganic into an unexpectedly fragile whole. Indeed, it seems that nothing ensures the survival of the city.

"Morning" manifests a particular neurosis regarding the city's vulnerability, a neurosis that can only be countered by the careful and precise maintenance of the machine. Any small deviation from the city's precise plan for the self could spell disaster: "Leave the house fifteen minutes later or earlier and join a different cast of characters. . . . Forget something upstairs and make the calculation. . . . He has timed this route down to the second and today they are whole minutes off and everything is awry" (29). Whitehead again directly references 9/11, bringing to mind the anecdotal accounts that emerged in the days following the event. Lives were saved when some missed their planes; lives were lost when others stopped on stairwells, a lost minute determining whether one

escaped the building in time.¹⁴⁹ The only defense against danger appears to be machine-like regularity, but even that cannot prevent and, indeed, only seems to ensure the tiniest of world-shifting wrongs (“Little things like that ruin promotions. It popped up on her cheek overnight and now no one will look her in the eye” [32]). Despite this dread, however, the text insists, “Soldier on. Pass the night shift on their way home. They have already seen the new situation on the front but cannot describe, lest you run back to the bunker of home” (33). Defense metaphors communicate a certain inevitably and necessity that accompany the essay’s mix of dread and resignation: because the city and the self have merged, the speakers have no choice but to take up their usual routine, cast here as defensive action. “Morning” thus displays one of the central themes of *Colossus*: rote tasks dehumanize the city’s inhabitants, turning their individual lives into a cycle of well-timed routines. The seamless integration of the people of “Morning” and their surroundings almost seems like what Raymond Kurzweil calls “robo sapiens,” a “machine/man synthesis” characterized by the “transferring [of] humans into death-free robots” (Dinello 4), but for the fact that the city is not immortal. Instead, its fragility comes to preoccupy the text.

Accordingly, the city’s green space, explored in the “Central Park” section, represents a threat to the urban identity rather than the expected or hoped for respite from it. The park exists outside of everyday routine, a “biological imperative”: “They’ve waited long months for this, have soldiered through slush and have worn sweaters. So it breaks in them with a snap, foot on twig: the Park” (37). While the city’s inhabitants feel drawn to the “antidote” (37) of the park, the lack of order inherent in such a space evokes

¹⁴⁹ This sense of provisionality also controls the lives of the characters in Kalfus’s *Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (see Chapter One).

anxiety: “Shall we go this way or that. Every day’s essential either-orness made plain . . . a forking path. Debate and deliberation until they sally arbitrarily. Just minutes in and the afternoon is set in stone. Whole possibilities canceled by this first mistake“ (37). Choice has become oppressive. Absent the pre-determined motions of the workday that seem at least to keep the city moving forward, the voices of “Central Park,” like those of “Morning,” fear the ramifications of making a wrong choice. Routine becomes essential to both comfort and survival: “People wear their first day of spring T-shirts” (37), the assumption of a uniform that attempts to subsume the changing season under the patterns of city life. The tyranny of choice neurotically repeats itself throughout the chapter, as a voice wonders, “Where to sit, where to sit. Our whole future depends on this choice” (38). Only briefly is the break from routine welcomed, when one speaker happens upon a group of dancers:

Look around. Brought together in this moment in a park on the first day of spring. A community. And fancy that in a city. Back to a time before zoning and rebar, one tribe, drums talking. Something that cannot be planned. Everybody knows they must remember this feeling because soon it is back to the usual debasement and they try to remember and then it stops. (45)

This “something that cannot be planned” is valuable only in that it evokes a time before the city’s creation; however, this event cannot be integrated into the larger experience of urban life. Instead, routine returns as quickly as it left: “All at once they want to go home. . . . Everyone knows how to fold a blanket. . . . Anything you found here must remain: it can’t exist outside. . . . Big hungry city but some relief: they know the rules again. At the

Don't Walk sign he comes to his senses, possessing dinner plans. He sighs. Glad that's over" (45-46). While the "big hungry city" is imposing with its "bullying highrises" (44) that surround the park and its "giant digital clock above the corporate headquarters [that] warns them of curfew" (40), the lack of routine represented by the park is even more threatening. Part of the park's threat resides in the fact that it, like the drum circle, is a reminder of a time before cities and, presumably, of the possibility that one could be returned, by either apocalyptic disaster or merely slow dissolution, to a similar life.¹⁵⁰ If the city brings order and forms the core of the urban dweller's identity, the park asserts its knowledge that an urban identity is itself constructed atop a creation that could easily dissolve.

To review, then, Whitehead's New York appears ready to collapse on itself at any moment; brushes with nature only produce more anxiety, not less, as they serve as reminders that the city was once unplanned, unformed space and could return to that state of nature once again. Reading *Colossus* in context with Whitehead's other New York City texts, critic Robert Butler explains, "*The Colossus of New York*, like *The Intuitionist*, is premised upon the belief that the postmodern American city is an infinitely complex technological system and, as such, is both extraordinarily powerful and perilously fragile" (78). Butler thus locates the city's fragility in the realization that such a creation is impossible to maintain. The text's anxiety over this impending dissolution reaches the point where it must be confronted in the "Broadway" section. Here, one solo speaker

¹⁵⁰ Whitehead continues to build this association between nature and danger in subsequent chapters. In "Rain," for example, he writes, "[E]very puddle wants to hug you. If not heavy motor vehicles then it is the children in their bright red boots detonating puddles on people" (63). Here the incursion of the natural on the city is even more closely associated with terror, as the water is a bomb waiting to explode. This image is repeated again later, when a speaker hides "in a phone booth preparing for the next sortie" of rain (67).

walks the length of Broadway, constantly confronting the doom that edges in on the city. Whitehead begins by describing the construction of the avenue: “It bulldozed across the city, grinding through grid. Diagonal across appalled avenues, scaring parks out of the way, squeezing buildings into flat iron” (75). The construction of Broadway thus forcibly beats back the natural and man-made objects in its path. But not long after it is made, it threatens to unmake itself: “Just hours before, rush hour made a trail. Trampling, taming But the undergrowth has burst up to flail eyes since, shrubbed up to fill footprints, and now all of them are scouts bending back mean branches” (75). Here Broadway is imagined as an urban jungle, returning to its figurative roots at the first opportunity.¹⁵¹ The speaker continues to see this reversion everywhere he looks, from storefronts that remind him of “a dead trade, something remembered only by old phone books. Blacksmith, knife sharpener” (77), to himself (“This is Broadway after all and it will undo you bit by bit” [80]). Unexpectedly, upon this recognition that the self and the city are one in their potential to be undone, the text turns to a tone of acceptance: “Without knowing it, he found a way into the street’s rhythm . . . making his feet sledgehammers. . . . The infrastructure is weak and aged and solid only in one place-- under his feet. . . . Broadway knows that every footfall is its heart beating, that we keep its heart beating, that it needs suckers and citizens to keep its blood flowing” (84). The feet are “sledgehammers,” implying that they break up and return to dirt the ground they trod, yet at the same time, the street is solid “only . . . under his feet.” The city and the citizen find themselves mutually dependent; just as the speakers are defined earlier in the

¹⁵¹ This image of a post-apocalyptic Broadway-turned-jungle calls to mind scenes from films like *Fight Club*, where streets become forests and highway systems become hunting routes.

text as created by the city, here the city seems to admit that, without them, it would fall apart.

At the close of the “Broadway” chapter, Whitehead is left with a set of interconnected problems: the city and its inhabitants depend on each other for their continued existence, but a seemingly random event could wipe one of them (and so, both of them) out at any moment. The people build the city, and the city by turn creates the identities of its people, but neither one can save the other from destruction. To combat this textual anxiety, Whitehead turns to a chapters-long geology motif that references the slow (but sometimes cataclysmic) changes to landscape in order to neutralize the threat posed by terror. That is, by dwelling on the naturally occurring structures that existed before the construction of Manhattan, Whitehead manages to build a continuum on which he locates past, current, and presumably future cities, the destruction of which may be mournful but is nonetheless expected. Scattered references to the landscape occur prior to the midpoint of text. In “Broadway,” for example, Whitehead writes, “Dead men dynamited rock to undo glacial handiwork but holdout boulders remain, unwilling to part with the deeds” (39). In this instance, the rocks are “handiwork,” implying meaning and intention in their creation, and they are undone by the meaning and intention of the dynamite (itself a piece of technology) in the hands of long-gone builders. Meanwhile, just as the current residents of New York have trouble letting go of the city they know, the “holdout boulders remain,” suggesting that the personified city has the same sense of ownership of the city “as it was,” as do the residents who still see their old buildings in the new skyline. The passing references to geology at earlier points in the text signal a desire to read technologic change through the mollifying lens of geologic change.

Starting in the “Coney Island” section,¹⁵² geology becomes the controlling metaphor that works to naturalize the threat of the city’s dissolution. Whitehead calls Coney Island “the bottom of the subway map,” where “[w]hat they find under their feet will not be pavement but something shiftier” (89). The beach is on the periphery of the city, and there it is easy to imagine a time after the city’s end, when pavement is pummeled back into pebbles and sand. At the beach, the speaker finds himself on the “Front line in the ancient blood feud between city and nature. Which side are you on. Every grain a commando on recon probing for weakness and reporting back” (91). This passage repeats earlier motifs, most importantly the image of Broadway as a receded jungle just waiting for its chance to regrow. Here the sand represents the “feud”; it “gets into: eyes, sandwiches, shoes Crotches and brainstems and decision-making places” (91). Even though the city still stands, the sand from which and on which it was built constantly threatens to overtake it. But instead of remaining in battle mode, Whitehead quickly shifts to acceptance. In a longer meditation on sandcastles, he writes, “Kids with pails move this bunch of sand from here to there to undo the secret design of tides. Aeons in the making and now it’s all ruined” (91). Just as the boulders on Broadway are “glacial handiwork,” here the sand comes ashore according to “secret design” and is ruined as easily as the section’s “fragile skylines,” connecting the two in an endless cycle of creation and destruction. The actions of children building sandcastles mimic the larger

¹⁵² This passage also evidences the way in which passing sci-fi references make their way into the text. In a description of sunbathing, Whitehead writes, “Sizzle on the griddle. How to serve man” (91). Here he references a well-known *Twilight Zone* episode, “To Serve Man.” In that story, aliens arrive on earth and address the United Nations, claiming they can use their technology to solve human problems, including hunger. Their solution is found in a book called *To Serve Man*, which turns out to be an alien guide on how to cook humans (insert B-movie gasp here). “How to serve man” thus references not just *The Twilight Zone* but also the “humanitarian solutions to famine” subplot of *Colossus* (1953), as well as the film’s UN setting.

designs of adults, as “Their castles rise proudly from soggy plots of real estate What they shape are cities, no less so for being soft and miniature. Imposition of human order on nature” (91). Whitehead continues to play with notions of order and design here, with human order overtaking the natural order, only to be replaced later: “Sand slips through fingers but no one takes the hint. Our juvenile exercises. What they build cannot last. Fragile skylines are too easily destroyed” (91-92). Sand finally takes on connotations of time here and, meanwhile, the castles are destroyed as the water resumes, for a time, its control of the natural order of the shoreline. In this passage Whitehead aligns the destruction of terrorism with that of nature, working toward a normalization of violence that would work to mollify anxieties associated with the attacks.¹⁵³

Whitehead continues this meditative consideration of nature in the passage immediately following, turning from the cycles of the city’s creation/destruction to the daily cycle of life. He writes, “Children yo-yo at the tideline, run in when it seems safe and out when a wave approaches. Depressing mechanical regularity. Mimicking parents and ruthless commute. Sometimes a workweek will grind you into sand, pulverize you into particles” (92). The events of September 11th clearly haunt this passage, here in the form of the lost who, going about their daily work routine, were destroyed in the attacks. At the same time, this association results in a reading of 9/11 as forming part of a constant threat rather than a singular event. The “mechanical regularity” of work is “ruthless,” it will “grind” and “pulverize you;” the collapse of the towers, in this reading,

¹⁵³ At the same time, associations between terrorism and nature also carry connotations of the animalization of the homelands of the attackers, as discussed above, thus introducing the possibility that any attempt to normalize 9/11 or subsume it under existing narratives of the nation inadvertently participates in exceptionalist thinking.

becomes just one of many ways for one to cycle from life to death, from built city to sand.

Whitehead ends this meditative mode with a nod to the beginnings of 19th-century earth science: “Events a thousand miles away find their final meaning in these gentle little consequences begging at shore. . . . Is it possible to stay here, renounce the city, swim the other way. The direction of their final strokes this day is an oath of fealty. Look at this pretty shell” (92-3). The final image of the shell references the foundations of evolutionary science—the amateur geologists who combed the shores of England for fossils of shells. The children on the shore, to whom Whitehead refers elsewhere as “human beings slouch[ing] from amino acid pools wearing tuxedos and top hats” (146), evolve rather quickly into the creators of castles, then the builders of cities. 9/11 imposes itself via the “skylines easily destroyed” and in the reality of an adult’s repetitive workday, but that regularity brings with it stability and, more importantly, intentionality. The chance occurrences of a provisional universe are injected with intention so that accidents seem to have order and design (“the unseen infrastructure of waves”). The “events” seem to happen by chance but in fact “find final meaning,” implying intent, if not exactly order, in small events. The “oath of fealty” to the city recalls the earlier images of castles and, with them, the order and determination of a feudal system. Both evolution and geologic change act as reassurance that the accidents and disorder of the provisional, evidenced in the individual’s experience of the city, in fact have meaning.

Whitehead thus uses the framework provided by allusions to geology to think of an invention not as an object that moves ever onward toward perfection but as one that slowly degenerates over time (or, in tech terms, becomes outmoded). In *Darwin’s Plots*

Gillian Beer explains the difference between academic and public understandings of evolutionary theory, saying, “evolutionary theory does not privilege the present, which sees it as a moving instant in an endless process of change. Yet it has persistently been recast to make it seem that all the past has been yearning towards the present moment and is satisfied now” (10). While Whitehead does not primarily work in evolution metaphors, Beers’ explanation—that evolution merely means change, not necessarily change toward some specifically better end—nicely summarizes the way in which Whitehead employs geology. Rather than thinking of the city as an invention that progresses positively over time, he thinks in terms of value-neutral change.

Following this foray into geology, “Coney Island” returns to a consideration of the mechanical city, and of the ways in which its inventions and creations threaten to fall apart naturally, under their own power, rather than the power of terror. As Whitehead writes, “the Wonder Wheel is a gear in the great engine of the metropolis and when it stops moving systems fail . . . Cherish the fear in loose bolts, statistical inevitabilities” (94-5). New York appears in this instance as an immensely complicated system, constantly threatening to collapse. But again, such a collapse, like the collapse of sandcastles earlier, would not be unexpected or even statistically unlikely. Coney Island’s roller coaster, the Cyclone,¹⁵⁴ is described as “A loop of ribbon lifted by a breeze . . . Seems so rickety. Struts and girders, toothpicks and straws. . . They make up scary stories about the fatality rate to scare him” (95). The Cyclone’s girders call up the similarly rickety structural underpinning of the Towers, especially when Whitehead describes the ride as “vertiginous”: “reel the other way and slam into highrises, into broad

¹⁵⁴ The Cyclone was damaged but not destroyed by Hurricane Sandy in 2012; it reopened in 2013.

brickfaces. A rollercoaster is your mind trying to reconcile two contradictory propositions. Earth and space, cement and air” (95). The ride becomes at once the dizzying ascent of the towers and the horrible fall, but again, that experience (the “slam” into brick, earth, and cement) occurs within the normalizing context of the amusement park. Coney Island’s location on the periphery of Manhattan thus allows it to act as a space of exploration and instruction, where the inhabitants of the city go to learn about the city and themselves and dally in the choice between “city and sea, life and death” (96).

As Whitehead works toward the end of his exploration of the city, images and themes from throughout the text reappear, gathering texture and meaning in a baroque fashion. In “Brooklyn Bridge,” a speaker once again considers the skyline, thinking, “A different atmosphere up here, favoring alternate evolutionary paths. The birds do what they will, equipped with wings” (101). Evolution returns, combined with an extreme height, implying that the human inhabitants of the city were not equipped by nature to handle the magnitude of their urban invention. Later in the walk on the bridge, the speaker notes that “At junctions emergency boxes offer aid but there’s no way help would arrive in time. Break down in the middle of the desert” (102). At this point it is clear that the Bridge has become an analogue for the Towers, with the hazardous height of the bridge mimicking the dimensions of the skyscrapers. Meanwhile, the speaker considers jumping: “And no one to stop you. Traffic slows to rubberneck All will be revealed in those final seconds before you hit” (102). This passage normalizes the experiences of the jumpers, gesturing to the fact that, in a city the size of New York, dangers are multiple and ever-present, with one easily standing in for the collapsed other.

Indeed, the bridge itself threatens collapse: “If only they understood that all that paint was added burden, that it groans beneath our good intentions. Next time will bring it all crashing down. The bridge pants, exhausted. Rattles. Rattles. If it shakes it can fall. Twin motorways bracket the walking path” (104). This passage perhaps over-references the WTC, with its “groans” (recalling the sounds of the Towers’ collapse) and “twin motorways,” but it still works to move the destruction of the WTC away from singularity and toward the commonality of both organic and mechanical experiences of dissolution.

Yet, in the midst of all this talk of collapse, near the end of “Brooklyn Bridge” Whitehead writes, “This little rivet here is doing all it can Like you, exerting miraculous will to keep from flying apart. Do not tire. Do not falter. Listen up . . . : We all need our monuments, no matter what size, carved stone or mortal clay. Do not doubt you inspire with every breath, that every breath is a marvel of engineering She and the bridge have so much on them, possess a weight that will not be blown away” (107-08). This section seems perhaps a bit too triumphant, and, in response, Whitehead follows with, “What did you hope to achieve by this little adventure. Nothing has changed” (108). Yet for that moment, the bridge (again, a WTC analogue) and the self are drawn together, this time not in a fearful way, dreading that the collapse of one means the collapse of the other, but in a recognition of their sameness. Here, the fact that the city and the self are interdependent is an uplifting rather than a crushing realization.

“Rush Hour” returns to considerations of geology, and it too shares the previous section’s reassuring vein by asserting a new solidity for the city. Whitehead writes, “Some of these buildings arrived by tugboat, towed in from the South Pacific islands where they were carved from black volcanic rock. These dark glaciers” (114). The

geology motif has returned, but this time Whitehead emphasizes not cyclical dissolution but long history. The arrival of building materials by boat references the Statue of Liberty, while the solid rock replaces the nuts and bolts ready to fly off at any moment in the earlier “Coney Island” configurations of human-made structures. While references to volcanoes and glaciers certainly imply change and destruction, both of those processes (the build-up and formation of volcanic rock and the wearing away of landscape by glacial ice) take ages to complete. Indeed, Whitehead describes Grand Central Station as a culmination of nature’s, not humanity’s, efforts: “And, lo, as the earth cooled, Grand Central bubbled up through miles of magma, lodged in the crust of this island, settled here. . . . The river of skyscrapers flows around it. Travelers swim to it and cling, savoring solid handhold” (119). This passage is significant because, in this telling, the buildings have become near-permanent, subject to natural forces yet equally as strong as those forces. Tying the creation of the skyline (“Recognize royalty by height, on sight, and memorize their crowns over time” [114]) to the creation of land lends the buildings longevity. Indeed, a speaker at the end of that section observes, “Few buildings around here deserve to be people, but . . . some of these folks are halfway to sheetrock. Steel-boned, mortar-blooded. Granite without end” (114). Thus another set of relationships is built here, as rock lends strength to buildings and buildings lend strength to their inhabitants. By the chapter’s end, the city and its selves have formed a new structure, “Not made for each other but maybe made out of each other. The same substance, the way the city is one substance, every inch of it from one end to the other. Solid. Immutable. Unbreakable” (139). The mutability and provisionality of the city have thus been replaced by permanence and predictability. While once the interdependence of city

and self were a cause for anxiety, that anxiety has lifted as the line between the two creations has blurred. Moreover, the geologic motif that engendered acceptance of the city's mutability is itself redeemed, shifting from a reminder that the city constantly changes to a reminder that such changes are less often cataclysmic and more often glacier-slow. While the pall of the WTC collapse still hangs over the city ("At the site of yesterday's accident there are shreds of metal and tiny cubes of glass [that spread] until it's an invisible layer of sorrow across the city" [138]), the essay ends with a call to "Look at the sky There's sunlight in its trademark colors, sunlight charging broken glass . . . and we're safe" (139).¹⁵⁵ A new dawn lights up the remnants of "yesterday's accident," as the sky that had been filled with terror is now filled with promises of stability and safety.

Colossus might have ended on that note of triumph over terror, but then it would not be the collection that it is. "Times Square," the penultimate chapter, begins, "It's not the way it used to be. Of course it's not. It's not even what it was five minutes ago" (143). Whitehead references both the city and the text's representation of it, later making fun of his own attempts to "sum up" the city: "Simmer the idea of metropolis until it is reduced to a few blocks Add hubris to taste" (144). This sudden shift in attitude seems to stem from a realization that city and self are not, after all, one solid, lasting structure. He writes, "Some time ago [the city] stopped needing human hands to make it go, for some time now it has been operating on pure will, but performing maintenance lets them sleep a little easier at night" (144). The text presents the inhabitants' ministrations, once thought vital to the city's survival, as superfluous, done more out of

¹⁵⁵ As mentioned in the Introduction, this desire to fill the hole in the sky left by the Towers is found in Kalfus and O'Neill as well.

habit than need. As the city moves forward (“Build it bigger, better. Brighter and blinding” [146]) the people are left behind, asking, “How do you say, I am lost and helpless. How do you say, I am desperate and alone” (145). Even the image of a heart, a callback to the “Broadway” section, cannot integrate city and self as seamlessly as before: “A Great Beating Heart. Congested by those who clot this thoroughfare. A healthier diet would including cutting down on us” (149). The people seem to hinder, not help, the progress of the city, and so they are “banished to arteries and avenues [to] feed other neighborhoods with new red-blooded knowledge” (149). As “Times Square” moves forward, replacing its old self with something bigger, better, and brighter, it also reintroduces the threats that technology poses to identity: the inhabitants serve no purpose in this version of the city. They are “lost and helpless” precisely because the city moves forward without them in a narrative of rapid progress rather than slow geologic change.

What saves “Times Square” is the recognition that this part of the city still contains that which it had supposedly erased. Throughout the section Whitehead references pre- and post-Giuliani versions of New York City. On one hand, there is the New York of “Peepworld. Playpen. Pleasure Palace.” On the other, “These new zoning laws, it’s been quite a blow to the Kleenex industry” (149). While at first it would seem that the “clean” version of New York has replaced the “dirty,” it soon becomes clear that Time Square contains multitudes: “Discount electronics and discount lives. No Money Down.” Amid the “all-you-can-eat booths of the cozy theme restaurant,” the speaker finds “Speakeasy City” and “The shop devoted to the sale, upkeep and cultural lore of porkpie hats” (153). To see that both versions of Times Square, the clean and dirty and old and new, exist at once, is to see that the city, for all its seemingly rapid change,

preserves much of what seems to be lost: “Fix exteriors and repave, spackle down and gussy up, but impossible to hide its true nature. Some things cannot be demolished. Some things reach down and become bedrock” (153). The geologic motif thus resurfaces one last time, to reassert the point that the city, for all its evidence of destruction, remains more solid than it seems. This image of “bedrock” recalls the layers and layers of fallen city that only gain strength and solidity as time passes. Whitehead does, however, complicate this image as well. In “JFK,” the final section of the text, he writes, “Take a moment to look back and regret all the things you didn’t get to do Promise yourself, Maybe next time. Assuming it will still be here when you finally return. Sometimes things disappear” (157). Again the text returns to considerations of loss. While that very loss has come to form the core of the New Yorker’s identity, as the very beginning of “City Limits” asserts, the altered skyline is no less mournful for being comprehensible.

According to critic Stephanie Li, a major problem with *Colossus* is its apolitical urge to read the destruction of the WTC as natural. In “‘Sometimes things Disappear’: Absence and Mutability in Colson Whitehead’s *The Colossus of New York*,” she writes, “[Whitehead] suggests that the fall of the WTC is best understood within a continuum of inevitable change. . . . [He] assures us that 9/11 didn’t change anything This acceptance of tragedy and deliberate violence obviates the need to question both why 9/11 occurred and how we have changed as a result” (94, 97). Li and I both read the obvious neutralization of terror’s threat in the text, but Li’s reading arises in part from her understanding of what “Colossus” references. She pinpoints a reference to the Colossus of Rhodes, writing that such a reference is “jarring because the latter was felled by an earthquake, while the events of 9/11 were not caused by an act of God, but were instead

engineered by terrorists. Whitehead's soothing, seemingly broad-minded approach to the events of 9/11 falters in this gap between the natural and the political" (95). I do not counter Li's reading; indeed, "colossus" most certainly references the ancient structure, especially given the size of the WTC. However, I would argue that a reading of the destruction of the towers as natural can in fact be a political reading. Whitehead does not ask why 9/11 happened any more than 1950s B-movies ask why communism happened. Instead, reading the destruction of the WTC on a continuum of technological change requires readers to confront the notion that the United States actively participates in its own destruction. As critic Robert Butler points out, "Colossal in design and intricate in the way they use a wide variety of interconnected technologies, American cities are vulnerable not only to spectacular terrorist attacks but also . . . to failures brought out by systemic weaknesses deeply rooted in American history and culture. [The city] does not need a terrorist plot to destroy it since it can collapse from inherent weaknesses in its own design" (85). The implication here is that the nation failed exactly at the point where it failed to consider the ramifications of creating a tech-based society. While this is not the strictly political reading Li claims is missing, it does perform a cultural critique of the function of technology in modern society. Moreover, any criticism that challenges the inherent rightness of technological progress likewise challenges the nation's exceptionalist discourse. In Whitehead's telling, the nation's scientific supremacy does not translate to greatness. Instead, it represents vulnerability precisely because it is tenuous. The text's geology motif allows Whitehead to explore change not just in terms of progress but also in terms of dissolution. In "When Zombies Attack!", he explains, "My idea of the ruined city is sturdy and long-standing. It is nourished by my memories

of broken-down '70s New York . . . and the way the refurbished, cleaned-up metropolis totters on the landfill of the bygone city” (“When Zombies Attack”). For Whitehead, ruin is sturdy; the reconstruction and imminent dissolution of the city peacefully coexist. While this reading of the city does appear to normalize the effects of terror, it problematizes exceptionalism by acknowledging that the city, like any built system, moves forward not toward absolute perfection but toward unknown change.

Furthermore, reading *Colossus* within the rich network of science fiction texts that Whitehead references points to a larger issue in the text, namely, the lack of community in New York City. As the readings of *Frankenstein* and *Colossus* (1958) at the beginning of this chapter show, when an invention is created in the absence of a supportive, understanding community, havoc ensues. As several critics have noted, community is glaringly absent from *Colossus*. Li calls it “an absence of connection and intimacy endemic to the city” (91), while Butler writes, “Whitehead’s city condemns its inhabitants to a complete isolation which guarantees their destruction” (82). Pointing out the solitary nature of the city is a fairly standard criticism of New York, but it gains greater significance in a sci-fi context, since the absence of community almost always signals the nation’s vulnerability. Of course, community is not always positive. In “Psychotronic Childhood” Whitehead muses, “A monster is a person who has stopped pretending. . . . Your relatives and your friends, your neighbors and the friendly folks who run the dry cleaners reveal themselves as the monsters they’ve always been, beneath the lie of civilization, of affection. They look the same, but now they want to destroy you, to consume you” (“Psychotronic”). While the absence of community is just as daunting, Whitehead’s careful consideration—even wariness—of community asserts itself as a

criticism of post-September 11th nationalist impulses. While calls for a unified city and a “United We Stand” America did not go unheeded, they also created an atmosphere in which any questioning of retaliation, up to and including the Iraq War, became un-American acts. Hence, while Whitehead clearly participates in a fictional tradition that recognizes the importance of community, he also strongly aligns himself with a scientific tradition that values the power of inquiry.

Finally, a consideration of Whitehead’s vision of New York City as an all-knowing, all-seeing entity, a monster of its own making, inevitably invites one to question whether such a piece of technology ought to exist at all, especially since the city’s speakers initially see the city’s totalizing knowledge as threatening. Admittedly, this threat resolves as the essays progress, but only because the self and the city that “see all” and “remembers, too” are inextricably intertwined. That is, once New Yorkers see that they cannot exist without New York (and vice versa) the threat shifts from a city that knows too much to the fear of what happens to the self when the city is destroyed. In a sense, this shift defines the relationship between self and consumer technology in the 21st-century. It has become nearly impossible for most people living in the West to imagine how one existed before cell phones, email, Google searches, and so forth. Whether these ways of knowing and interacting are necessary or good has moved beyond consideration now that they are essential to daily existence. Likewise, *The Colossus of New York*’s depiction of the life in the technological age simultaneously pinpoints the monstrous vulnerability of the experience while acknowledging that alternative ways of knowing and being, though they exist, are both frightening and undesirable.

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